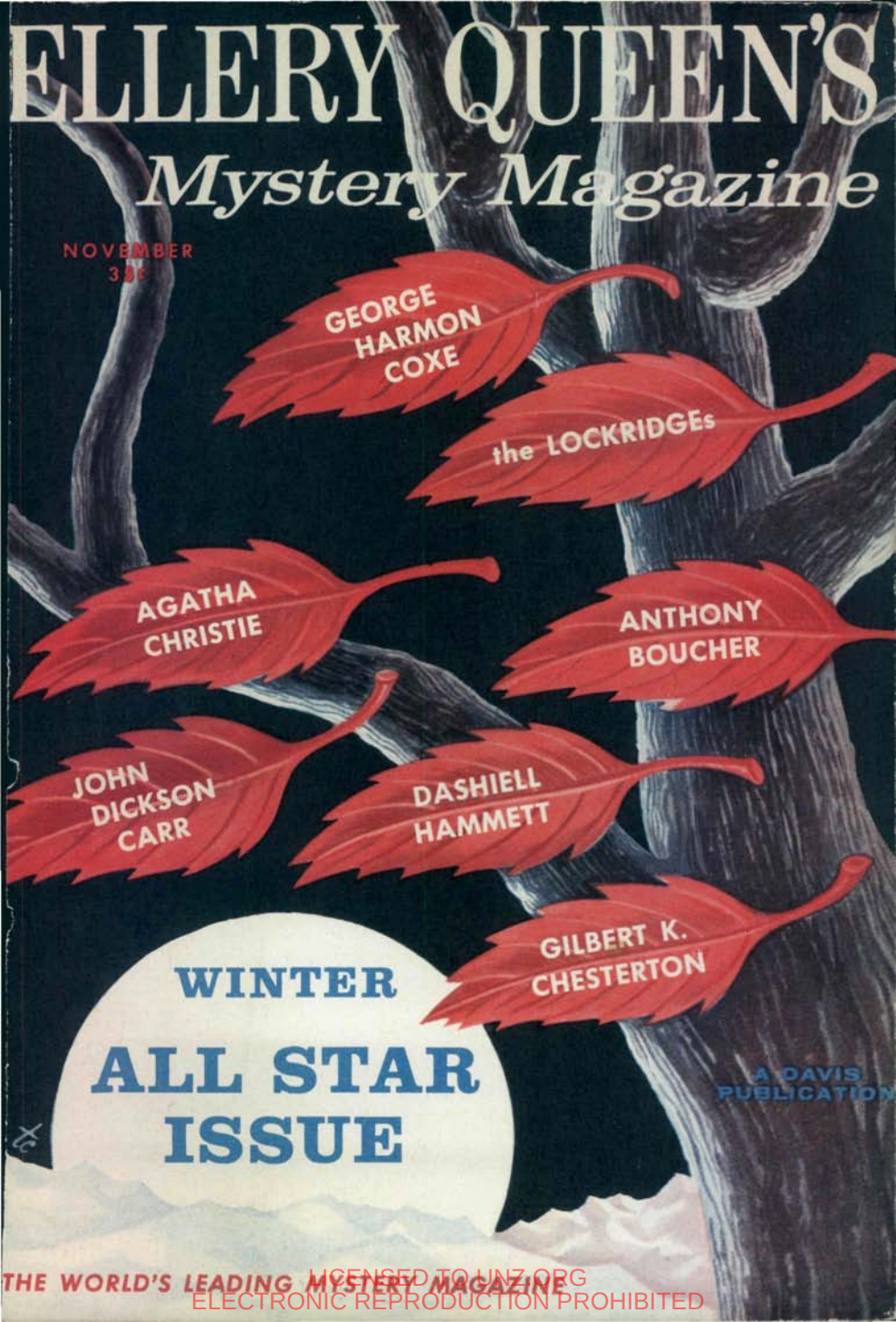

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Mystery Magazine

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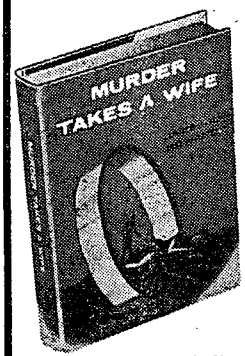

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

a new story by

AUTHOR: **GEORGE HARMON COXE**

TITLE: ***A Routine Night's Work***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Carl Broderick

LOCALE: A large city in the United States

COMMENTS: *Join a dogged, conscientious detective and a cynical newspaper columnist in their investigation of a former show girl's "suicide" —from the river to a smashing climax . . .*

CARL BRODERICK, FIRST-GRADE detective attached to Homicide, eased the police sedan to a stop at the side of the Riverway and said, "It ought to be about here."

He cut the motor and snapped on his parking lights. When he opened the door and got out, Wally Grant, columnist de luxe for the *Gazette,* opened the other door to join him. They stood at the side of the road for a moment letting their eyes become accustomed to the darkness that stretched across the quarter-mile void between the road and the river. Then Broderick started along the weed-strewn stretch of turf that extended to the embankment.

Neither man spoke until they reached the edge of the steeply sloping gravel bluff overhanging the brief shoreline of the river, and then Grant said dryly, "Pretty, huh?"

Overhead the night sky was overcast and sullen, the clouds low-hung as though compressing the humid air into a heavy vacuum that dispelled all breeze. The river, a half mile wide here, was sleek and black and restless, its flat sheen broken by the shimmer of reflected lights from the city on its opposite bank and from the long arc of lamps that dotted the Raleigh

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Bridge a mile or more to the left.

Thirty feet from the shore, the red and green riding lights of a police launch hung motionless above the water and made the hull an obscure blotch. At the river's edge a vague figure crunched gravel under restless feet until Broderick said,

"Hey, how do you get down?"

A flashlight stabbed the darkness, focusing on the detective's face. A thick voice boomed,

"Hello, Brodie. Slide."

Broderick grunted and jumped stiff-legged. His heels hit the slope halfway down and he slid the remaining distance, filling his shoes with sand and fine gravel. As he recovered his balance, Grant smacked into him, knocking him into the harbor policeman who cursed once and said,

"You bring the M.E.?"

Broderick said, "No. Let's take the flash."

He swiveled the beam across the launch and the uniformed figure lounging on the cushioned seat behind the wheel, then dipped it to the water's edge. One end of a long pole about two inches in diameter lay on the beach. About eight feet of this pole was out of water. He knew what was on the other end, but he could not see it—just the section of pole and the black oily surface of the river.

The policeman, a burly figure in hip boots, said, "We got her down by the Bayside Club. Her coat caught on a nail in the float. The searchlight picked her up."

Broderick stood there silently, a straight stiff figure staring sightlessly at the spot where the pole disappeared in the water. His neat blue suit and his compact leanness made him look taller than his even six feet, and the reflected light made his tawny rectangular face a somber brown mask beneath the lightweight gray felt. A passing mood brought on by imagination and the dank smell of the river pressed in upon him, bringing with it an unusual sense of depression. Grant broke into this mood before it could grow:

"Well, when do we start?" the columnist wanted to know.

"When the Medical Examiner gets here."

"Hell, I thought it would be short and snappy."

"Did I ask you to come? Why don't you go write that column?"

"It's written—for tomorrow," Grant said wearily. "Anyway, I need a change, and you amuse me. Only I don't know yet why a homicide man has to check up on every suicide by drowning."

"How do you know it's suicide? You haven't seen her."

"It'll be suicide."

Broderick turned off the flashlight and sighed. "Probably. I told you it was routine. The Captain just wanted it checked and I'm the sort of guy that does checking and—"

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"Checking," Grant cut in, "to see she hasn't got a bullet in her or her head bashed in. The department's getting jumpy and you're afraid you'll get another one you can't solve."

"Yeah," snorted Broderick. "And it's you newspaper guys—" His voice trailed off and he turned away, reaching for a cigarette.

There was more than a little truth in what Grant said. Captain Sharkey, head of the Homicide Squad, was plenty jumpy. Ten days ago a young woman, identified after an exhaustive investigation as Ruth Jackson, an unemployed entertainer, had been picked up in a vacant lot with her skull crushed.

The murder broke on a night that had been unusually barren of important stories and the newspapers had seized the morsel gleefully. The work of a madman, they said, someone temporarily crazed when the girl resisted him. They warned the city's parents, decried the police department for the outrage.

And for the police it was the Homicide Squad that bore the brunt of the attack that came from the Mayor via the District Attorney, the Commissioner, and the Superintendent. So Broderick was here to make sure that this death was routine business.

Grant moved up to him behind the dull glow of a cigarette-end as Broderick glanced out across that black water and again felt the heaviness of that depressing mood.

"It's a tough way to go," he said finally.

"Why?" asked Grant.

"I don't know. The river bothers me. Gettin' hauled out of the water don't appeal to me. Something futile, hopeless about it. The end of the road for somebody that's been kicked around until—"

"I might make a paragraph out of it sometime," Grant said.

"Out of what?"

"You. The human side of a cop." Grant's snort was faintly mocking. "It's the sentiment in you."

"Sentiment?" *scoffed* Broderick, matching the columnist's tone. "Me? Why, at heart I'm a softie."

"At heart you're an ice cube," scoffed Grant.

When the Examiner's physician and two ambulance attendants arrived, they pulled her out and placed her on the gravel shore.

She might have been anywhere between thirty and thirty-five, and her figure had the rather heavy solidness that often comes at that age. She wore a sodden linen suit and a shabby-looking dark coat; there was no hat and her dark hair was matted and tangled about her forehead and nape. In the glare of two flashlights her face was curiously pale and mottled, and the lips were strikingly red as if the lipstick she had used was permanently waterproof. Yet for all its deathlike significance there was

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about the face something of peace and resignation.

The Examiner's man rose after a cursory examination.

"Not a mark on her that I can see. Of course I'll check that later." He sucked his lips audibly. "She hasn't been in long either."

"How long?" asked Broderick flatly.

"Well – I'm speaking comparatively," the doctor said. "Two or three hours. Maybe five. But no longer than that."

"Probably wouldn't've got her," the harbor cop offered, "if the current hadn't pushed her against that float so that her coat caught."

"You through?" the Examiner's man asked Broderick.

"I want a look at her clothes."

"I'll shove off then." The doctor jerked a thumb toward the two ambulance men. "They'll take care of her when you finish."

While the policeman held the flashlight, Broderick went to one knee and made a thorough search. When he finished and stood up he said thoughtfully, "That's funny. Not a damn thing but a label in the coat. And that looks so old it won't do much good. No jewelry, nothing in any of the pockets."

There was one other thing that bothered him. The woman's face was vaguely familiar. He had seen it before—some place. Not recently but– He turned to Grant.

The columnist was staring down at the dead woman, and Broderick, realizing now that Grant had not spoken since the arrival of the Examiner's man, wondered why.

He knew Grant well, had known him when he was a reporter and before he inherited a column the *Gazette* had developed. Since then Grant had built up a feature that had become enormously popular; but for all of this he remained a smart reporter who got around and seemed to know everyone and everything.

His dry sardonic speech, his bored and nonchalant manner, was largely a defensive pose which was apparently meant to say, "Just because I peddle sentiment is no reason why I have to be that way myself." Right now the veneer of his manner was raised. He stood there, a trim-figured fellow, immaculately dressed in a dark suit and a black evening felt, keenly interested, held, almost transfixed, by the dead woman's face.

Broderick said, "I'm glad I brought you. You know her, huh?"

"Alma Morgan," Grant said.

Broderick repeated the name softly. It meant something, struck a responsive chord, but still it eluded him. He could not place the woman and after a moment said so. The announcement apparently snapped Grant's reverie. When he spoke again his voice was caustic.

"Certainly you can't place her—you're only a cop."

"You know where she lives?"

"No. But she's got a husband. An

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ex-husband. Lou Tandy. He might know."

Broderick took off his hat and ran a hand over a forehead and hairline that were damp. "He runs the Club doesn't he?"

"He fronts for it."

"Also I hear he's a theatrical booker."

"For any cheap act you can name. You want a trio for a club date, see Lou Tandy. Need a dancer, a singer, a piano player, a stripper? Call Lou."

"He was questioned in the Bradford case," Broderick said thoughtfully, "because the girl used to hang around the club sometimes, but nothing came of it. What about this one?"

"The last I heard she was working as cashier down at Enriquo's. Before that—" Grant broke off, seemed to shrug in the darkness. "For a while—that was some years back—she hit some of the best spots in the East, then—"

Broderick reached out and took the little columnist by the arm.

"Let's see if we can find out where she lived. You can tell me about it in the car."

Wally Grant took up his tale as soon as the police sedan got under way, and his story became something of a soliloquy, the speech that of a man recapturing memories and talking to himself.

"She started right here when I was a cub reporter on the old *Eagle,* and she went up fast. A dancer. She made a couple of musical comedies and had some real good dates in Florida. Then, for some damn reason, she married Lou Tandy."

Grant grunted softly. "It's things like that you can't figure. He was her manager and he was a heel from 'way back. I guess he was a smoothie and at that time—that's eight or nine years ago—he had ideas. He wanted to put on his own shows. Tried to build them around her. They flopped because she couldn't carry them alone and he wouldn't spend for the talent to back her up.

"They sort of dropped from sight for a while, then I heard he left her out on the West Coast. When I saw her again she was all through as a dancer. She'd put on too much weight and she didn't seem to have any more ambition."

Grant shifted in the seat, slouching down with feet stretched out and his chin on his chest.

"When she finally woke up she got her divorce. She tried to come back in the small time but she never really made it. I guess she got pushed around until the racket licked her. She's been working for Enriquo for over a year.

"Swell, huh? After Broadway." Grant muttered something under his breath, then added, "But the river. It just goes to show you—" He broke off suddenly, pushed erect. "But why all the sudden in-

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terest?" he said. "Why all this checking up? It's not your job now. Anybody'd think it was homicide."

"I'm wondering," Broderick murmured.

"Wondering? About what? She couldn't take it any longer, so she jumped—that's all. Not a mark on her."

"And no identification either," said Broderick. "Nothing in her pockets, no cards or purse or money—nothing. That ain't the way most suicides go. Most of 'em leave a note. When they don't, they don't bother about going unidentified—unless they've got something to cover up. From what you say she didn't have anything to cover up but failure and that's excusable and—"

"A moralist, huh?"

"—anyway, there's lots of easier ways than this. A woman might want to call it off, but damn few of 'em would get steamed up about Potter's Field, or maybe no burial at all . . . I don't say it's homicide," Broderick added wearily, "but until I get more dope it could be. And anything that could be is my job." He grunted resignedly and lapsed into silence.

He did not, he told himself, think this was really murder. On the face of it the death was suicide, pure and simple. Lack of identification bothered him but was by no means conclusive. His argument with Grant was merely the outlet for a stubborn irritation at the columnist's cocksure manner.

"Anyway," the detective added flatly, "the skipper said check, so I check." He glanced out the window, saw that they had crossed the bridge and were approaching the avenue. "If this bores you—"

"It bores me," Grant cut in, "but so would a night club."

Enriquo's was closed but light showed at the edges of the shutters and Broderick's second knock brought the proprietor to the door. When he recognized Grant he opened up immediately.

"Ahh, Mr. Grant. Come in, come in. We are closed, as you can see, but if you would like a drink—"

"No, thanks," Grant said. "How's the chicken caneloni these days?"

"Superb as always. But you do not come to see for yourself."

Grant said he would make a note of it. He introduced Broderick, then spoke of Alma Morgan, asking if she still worked as cashier.

"Until last Saturday, yes," Enriquo said.

"Did she quit?" Broderick asked.

"It is hard to say." Enriquo tipped his head and half closed one eye. "There was a man. I think maybe Alma is in love. She say she may marry this man and she give me notice and I tell her to take some time off to be sure."

He went on to tell how the man had come for dinner one night,

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then returned night after night, at first stopping only to talk to Alma and then as the friendship progressed, returning to meet her when she quit work.

"What's his name?" Broderick asked.

Enriquo frowned and finally shook his head. "I am sorry. I have heard the name but I cannot recall it now. A funny name. Short."

"Well, what does he look like?"

"Medium tall." Enriquo held his palms apart. "Sort of broad. Maybe forty, with much color in face, like he work outside, not in city . . . Has something happened to Alma?"

Grant opened his mouth but Broderick cut him off. "Just checking some things. You got her address?"

"Sure." Enriquo stepped behind the desk and read it off.

Broderick made a note of it. He thanked Enriquo, nodded to Grant, and said he would be back some evening to try the chicken caneloni.

"You do that," Enriquo said. "And if you see Alma you tell her we miss her."

A taxi was parked at the curb halfway to the corner in the quiet darkness of Stephan Street, and the police car angled in front of it to stop a few feet beyond, opposite a squarish, three-story house with a towered, antiquated form of architecture that was apparent even in the darkness.

Broderick took a quick glance at the taxi and the dozing driver, making a mental note of the license number before starting up the high stone steps that led to an open vestibule, Grant at his heels. A glass-framed sign hanging at the edge of the outer door said: *ROOMS*. The inner door was unlocked and they stepped into the cool, musty air that hung in the high-ceilinged hall. After one glance around Broderick stepped back to the vestibule and pushed the bell button, setting up a jangling metallic vibration that came from some unseen spot deep down the hall adjacent to the stairs.

The landlady, a spare, gaunt figure with a hatchet face and wearing a faded blue wrapper, was fully two minutes in answering the bell, and when she did arrive she was in a snapping, irritable frame of mind.

Broderick said he was sorry to disturb her, and asked if Alma Morgan lived there.

"No, she don't," the landlady said. "She did."

"Until when?"

"Until today. I got a note from her. Her brother brought it—and the rent she owed me. It said for me to let him pack her things."

"Where was she going?"

"She didn't say. Just said she had a job and wouldn't have time to get her things."

"When'd you get the note?"

"About an hour and a half ago—

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round ten thirty."

"An hour and—" wheezed the columnist.

"Yes. And don't stand there and ask me anything else because that's all I know and I'm up at five thirty and I need my sleep." The woman folded the wrapper tighter, spun about, and started down the hall.

Broderick asked how to get to Alma Morgan's former room and the landlady called directions without turning or slowing down. When he started up the stairs, with Grant crowding at his heels, he said,

"How does it look now?"

"Screwy," said Grant. "But the hour and a half don't mean anything. She could have written the note before."

"Quite a while before," said Broderick.

Alma Morgan's room was the last one on the right in the second-floor hall, and Broderick, realizing now that he should have taken the precaution of asking for the key, tried the knob. When it turned easily, he pushed into a room that was already lighted and not as empty as he had expected.

Near the opposite wall a man knelt beside a black hatbox and a bulky suitcase. He was nattily dressed in gray flannel and his hat was pushed back from a swart, smooth face. Apparently startled by the sudden entrance as he attempted to strap up the suitcase, his black eyes widened, then narrowed quickly as his body tensed.

Broderick swept the room with a glance and found it discouraging. A furnished place. Soiled slip covers on the two overstuffed pieces, the rest of the cheap furniture worn and scarred. His glance jerked back to the kneeling man and as he moved across the threshold, he felt Grant at his side and heard the door click shut.

"You the guy that brought the note?" Broderick asked.

"Yeah."

"Her brother."

"Her brother," the fellow said, his voice challenging and insolent.

"Where was she going?"

"To Chicago. She's already gone. And who the hell are you?"

Broderick's lean face had fashioned a fixed smile that was grimly amused. He knew definitely, although he could not yet reason it out, that here was something more than simple suicide. His hand moved backward at his side as he said.

"Chicago. And you're her brother?"

He never touched the gun. Not that he was slow; he wasn't. But the other man had a certain professional finesse born of long experience, and he had prepared for possible emergencies by taking out his gun beforehand. It lay hidden by the suitcase, but Broderick did not see it until it flashed into sight.

"Forget it!"

Broderick's hand dropped back

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to his side. "Okay," he said easily.

The dark face warped into a smile and he stood up, tall and thin in his well-pressed flannels. Backing around to one side, he waved his automatic toward the suitcase.

"Strap it up!"

Broderick came forward and strapped the bag.

"Now, take off your belts, both of you," and when Broderick and Grant obeyed, he spoke to the detective. "Lie down—on your belly."

Broderick's face stiffened and he hesitated a moment, his smoky-blue eyes hard and shiny.

"Or do I park you down that way permanently?"

Broderick got down on his knees and stretched out. The swart man made Grant strap his wrists and ankles. When this was finished, the gunman pulled down the window curtains, twisted them, and tied up the columnist.

He had just finished when a soft knock came at the door. Cursing softly, he moved quickly across the room. He scowled, his black eyes swiveling nervously. When the knock came again, he threw open the door and jumped back, his gun ready.

The man who stood in the opening stared wide-eyed at the gun, his body suddenly stiff and immobile until the gunman ordered him into the room, then closed and locked the door. The newcomer saw Broderick and Grant and some of the color crept back into his face.

Stocky, of medium height, and dressed in a conservative dark suit, he was completely nondescript in appearance, his squarish face ordinary enough except for a noticeable tan. To Broderick, craning his neck to get a better view, he fitted exactly the description Enriquo had given.

"Well," he breathed finally. "What—what's all this?" He took off a felt hat that sat squarely on his head, revealing hair that was merely hair-colored and lusterless. "I thought—isn't Alma here?"

"She's gone," the gunman said.

"Gone?"

"You heard me."

The stocky man turned his hat brim around, eyed the automatic a moment, then continued in a serious, apologetic monotone that matched his manner.

"She wouldn't go without telling me."

"Why not? Who are you—where do you fit?"

"Rudd," the man said slowly. "Thomas Rudd. Alma and I—we had a date."

"At twelve o'clock at night, huh?" cut in Grant.

"But this was a special occasion. She said she had to see some people and make a decision. She said she'd be back before twelve and if everything worked out all right—"

"Shut up!"

The swart man looked suddenly

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harried and uncertain. His free hand drew into a fist at his side; then he turned and stepped to a telephone stand near an inner doorway. Dialing a number, he waited impatiently, finally said,

"This is Max. Yes. Sure. Only get a load of this. A couple of johnnies walk in on me before I finish. One of 'em looks like a cop . . . Yeah. I got 'em tied up. Only wait–another guy just walked in on us. Name's Rudd. I was thinkin' he might be the guy . . . Yeah. Okay, I just wanted to be sure."

Max hung up and spoke to Rudd. "Come on, you."

Rudd's "Me?" was sheer surprise.

"Yes, you! I need company. Grab those bags."

"But–" sputtered Rudd. "I mean –I–Alma."

Max stepped forward, gun leveled. "Grab the bags!"

Broderick said, "You'd better do what he says. He's getting jumpy."

Rudd tried to smile and failed. He glanced nervously at Broderick and Grant; he finally picked up the two bags and said, "Well – all right." He was still quietly protesting when Max followed him from the room and slammed the door.

When Grant stopped swearing he said, "What a dick you turned out to be."

"Yeah," said Broderick grimly, rolling up against him, "and how does the suicide story look now?"

"It don't."

"Then get your back against mine and undo these straps. I'm gonna find out who put that woman in the river."

(*continued on page 122*)

NEXT MONTH . . .

Anonymous letters threaten a young schoolteacher – a new novelette

HUGH PENTECOST's *The Man With Half a Face*

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**AGATHA CHRISTIE**
TITLE:	***Hercule Poirot, Armchair Detective***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Hercule Poirot
LOCALE:	England
TIME:	A generation ago
COMMENTS:	*Poirot undertook, in the classic manner, to solve a case—a baffling disappearance—without moving from his chair. Leave it to Papa Poirot—and his little gray cells!*

POIROT AND I WERE EXPECTING OUR old friend Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard to tea. We were sitting round the tea table awaiting his arrival. Poirot had just finished carefully straightening the cups and saucers which our landlady was in the habit of throwing, rather than placing, on the table. He had also breathed heavily on the teapot, and polished it with a silk handkerchief. The kettle was on the boil, and a small enamel saucepan beside it contained some thick, sweet chocolate which was more to Poirot's palate than what he described as "your English poison."

A sharp "rat-tat" sounded below, and a few minutes afterward Japp entered briskly.

"Hope I'm not late," he said as he greeted us. "To tell the truth, I was yarning with Miller, the man who's in charge of the Davenheim case."

I pricked up my ears. For the last three days the papers had been full of the strange disappearance of Mr. Davenheim, senior partner of Davenheim and Salmon, the well-known bankers and financiers. On Saturday last he had walked out of his house, and had never been seen since. I looked forward to extracting some interesting details from Japp.

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"I should have thought," I remarked, "that it would be almost impossible for anyone to 'disappear' nowadays."

Poirot moved a plate of bread and butter an eighth of an inch, and said sharply, "Be exact, my friend. What do you mean by 'disappear'? To which class of disappearance are you referring?"

"Are disappearances classified and labeled, then?" I laughed.

Japp smiled also. Poirot frowned at us both.

"But certainly they are! They fall into three categories: First, and most common, the voluntary disappearance. Second, the much abused 'loss of memory' case—rare, but occasionally genuine. Third, murder, and a more or less successful disposal of the body. Do you refer to all three as impossible of execution?"

"Very nearly so, I should think. You might lose your own memory, but some one would be sure to recognize you—especially in the case of a well-known man like Davenheim. Then 'bodies' can't be made to vanish into thin air. Sooner or later they turn up, concealed in lonely places, or in trunks. Murder will out. In the same way, the absconding clerk, or the domestic defaulter, is bound to be run down in these days of wireless telegraphy. He can be headed off from foreign countries; ports and railway stations are watched; and, as for concealment in this country, his features and appearance will be known to everyone who reads a daily newspaper. He's up against civilization."

"Mom ami," said Poirot, "you make one error. You do not allow for the fact that a man who had decided to make away with another man—or with himself in a figurative sense—might be that rare machine, a man of method. He might bring intelligence, talent, a careful calculation of detail to the task; and then I do not see why he should not be successful in baffling the police force."

"But not *you,* I suppose?" said Japp good-humoredly, winking at me. "He couldn't baffle *you,* eh, Monsieur Poirot?"

Poirot endeavored, with a marked lack of success, to look modest. "Me, also! Why not? It is true that I approach such problems with an exact science, a mathematical precision, which seems, alas, only too rare in the new generation of detectives!"

Japp grinned more widely.

"I don't know," he said. "Miller, the man who's on this case, is a smart chap. You may be very sure he won't overlook a footprint, or a cigar ash, or a crumb even. He's got eyes that see everything."

"So, *mon ami,"* said Poirot, "has the London sparrow. But all the same, I should not ask the little brown bird to solve the problem of Mr. Davenheim."

"Come now, monsieur, you're not

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going to run down the value of details as clues?"

"By no means. These things are all good in their way. The danger is they may assume undue importance. Most details are insignificant; one or two are vital. It is the brain, the little gray cells"—he tapped his forehead—"on which one must rely. The senses mislead. One must seek the truth within—not without."

"You don't mean to say, Monsieur Poirot, that you would undertake to solve a case without moving from your chair, do you?"

"That is exactly what I do mean—granted all the facts were placed before me. I regard myself as a consulting specialist."

Japp slapped his knee. "Hanged if I don't take you at your word. Bet you a fiver that you can't lay your hand—or rather tell me where to lay my hand—on Mr. Davenheim, dead or alive, before a week is out."

Poirot considered. *"Eh bien, mon ami,* I accept. *Le sport,* it is the passion of your English. Now—the facts."

"On Saturday last, as is his usual custom, Mr. Davenheim took the 12:40 train from Victoria to Chingside, where his palatial country place, The Cedars, is situated. After lunch he strolled round the grounds and gave various directions to the gardeners. Everybody agrees that his manner was absolutely normal. After tea he put his head into his wife's boudoir, saying that he was going to stroll down to the village and post some letters. He added that he was expecting a Mr. Lowen, on business. If Lowen should come before he himself returned, he was to be shown into the study and asked to wait. Mr. Davenheim then left the house by the front door, walked leisurely down the drive and out at the gate, and—was never seen again. From that hour he vanished completely."

"Pretty—very pretty—altogether a charming little problem," murmured Poirot. "Proceed, my good friend."

"About a quarter of an hour later a tall, dark man with a thick black mustache rang the front-door bell, and explained that he had an appointment with Mr. Davenheim. He gave the name of Lowen, and in accordance with the banker's instructions was shown into the study. Nearly an hour passed. Mr. Davenheim did not return. Finally Mr. Lowen rang the bell, and explained that he was unable to wait any longer, as he must catch his train back to town. Mrs. Davenheim apologized for her husband's absence, which seemed unaccountable, as she knew him to have been expecting the visitor. Mr. Lowen reiterated his regrets and took his departure.

"Well, as everyone knows, Mr. Davenheim did *not* return. Early on Sunday morning the police were communicated with, but could

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make neither head nor tail of the matter. Mr. Davenheim seemed literally to have vanished into thin air. He had not been to the post office; nor had he been seen passing through the village. At the station they were positive he had not departed by any train. His own motor had not left the garage. If he had hired a car to meet him in some lonely spot, it seems almost certain that by this time, in view of the large reward offered for information, the driver of it would have come forward to tell what he knew.

"True, there was a small race-meeting at Entfield, five miles away, and if he had walked to that station he might have passed unnoticed in the crowd. But since then his photograph and a full description of him have been circulated in every newspaper, and nobody has been able to give any news of him. We have, of course, received many letters from all over England, but each clue, so far, has ended in disappointment.

"On Monday morning a further sensational discovery came to light. Behind a *portière* in Mr. Davenheim's study stands a safe, and that safe had been broken into and rifled. The windows were fastened securely on the inside, which seems to put an ordinary burglary out of court, unless, of course, an accomplice within the house fastened them again afterwards. On the other hand, Sunday having intervened, and the household being in a state of chaos, it is likely that the burglary was committed on the Saturday, and remained undetected until Monday."

"Précisément," said Poirot dryly. "Well, is he arrested, *ce pauvre M. Lowen?"*

Japp grinned. "Not yet. But he's under pretty close supervision."

Poirot nodded. "What was taken from the safe? Have you any idea?"

"We've been going into that with the junior partner of the firm and Mrs. Davenheim. Apparently there was a considerable amount in bearer bonds, and a very large sum in banknotes, owing to some large transaction having been just carried through. There was also a small fortune in jewelry. All Mrs. Davenheim's jewels were kept in the safe. The purchasing of them had become a passion with her husband of late years, and hardly a month passed that he did not make her a present of some rare and costly gem."

"Altogether a good haul," said Poirot thoughtfully. "Now, what about Lowen? Is it known what his business was with Davenheim that evening?"

"Well, the two men were apparently not on very good terms. Lowen is a speculator in quite a small way. Nevertheless, he has been able once or twice to score a *coup* off Davenheim in the market, though it seems, they seldom or never actually met. It was a

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matter concerning some South American shares which led the banker to make his appointment."

"Had Davenheim interests in South America, then?"

"I believe so. Mrs. Davenheim happened to mention that he spent all last autumn in Buenos Aires."

"Any trouble in his home life? Were the husband and wife on good terms?"

"I should say his domestic life was quite peaceful and uneventful. Mrs. Davenheim is a pleasant, rather unintelligent woman. Quite a nonentity, I think."

"Then we must not look for the solution of the mystery there. Had he any enemies?"

"He had plenty of financial rivals, and no doubt there are many people whom he has got the better of who bear him no particular good will. But there was no one likely to make away with him—and, if they had, where is the body?"

"Exactly. As Hastings says, bodies have a habit of coming to light with fatal persistency."

"By the way, one of the gardeners says he saw a figure going round to the side of the house toward the rose garden. The French door of the study opens onto the rose garden, and Mr. Davenheim frequently entered and left the house that way. But the man was a good way off, at work on some cucumber frames, and cannot even say whether it was the figure of his master or not. Also, he cannot fix the time with any accuracy. It must have been before six, as the gardeners cease work at that time."

"And when did Mr. Davenheim leave the house?"

"About half-past five or thereabouts."

"What lies beyond the rose garden?"

"A lake."

"With a boathouse?"

"Yes, a couple of punts are kept there. I suppose you're thinking of suicide, Monsieur Poirot? Well, I don't mind telling you that Miller's going down tomorrow expressly to see that piece of water dragged. That's the kind of man he is!"

Poirot smiled faintly, and turned to me. "Hastings, I pray, hand me that copy of the *Daily Blade*. If I remember rightly, there is an unusual photograph there of the missing man."

I rose and found the sheet required. Poirot studied the features attentively.

"H'm!" he murmured. "Wears his hair rather long and wavy, full mustache and pointed beard, bushy eyebrows. Eyes dark?"

"Yes."

"Hair and beard turning gray?" The detective nodded. "Well, Monsieur Poirot, what have you got to say to it all? Clear as daylight, eh?"

"On the contrary, most obscure."

The Scotland Yard man looked pleased.

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"Which gives me great hopes of solving it," finished Poirot placidly.

"Eh?"

"I find it a good sign when a case is obscure. If a thing is clear as daylight—*eh bien,* mistrust it! Someone has made it so."

Japp shook his head almost pityingly. "Well, each to their fancy. But it's not a bad thing to see your way clear ahead."

"I do not see," murmured Poirot. "I shut my eyes—and think."

Japp sighed. "Well, you've got a clear week to think in."

"And you will bring me any fresh developments that arise—the result of the labors of the hard-working and lynx-eyed Inspector Miller, for instance?"

"Certainly. That's in the bargain."

"Seems a shame, doesn't it?" said Japp to me as I accompanied him to the door. "Like robbing a child!"

I could not help agreeing with a smile. I was still smiling as I reentered the room.

"Eh bien!" said Poirot immediately. "You make fun of Papa Poirot, is it not so?" He shook his finger at me. "You do not trust his gray cells? Ah, do not be confused! Let us discuss this little problem—incomplete as yet, I admit, but already showing one or two points of interest."

"The lake!" I said significantly.

"And even more than the lake, the boathouse!"

I looked sidewise at Poirot. He was smiling in his most inscrutable fashion. I felt that, for the moment, it would be quite useless to question him further.

We heard nothing of Japp until the following evening, when he walked in about nine o'clock. I saw at once by his expression that he was bursting with news of some kind.

"Eh bien, my friend," remarked Poirot. "All goes well? But do not tell me that you have discovered the body of Mr. Davenheim in your lake, because I shall not believe you."

"We haven't found the body, but we did find his *clothes*—the identical clothes he was wearing that day. What do you say to that?"

"Any other clothes missing from the house?"

"No, his valet is quite positive on that point. The rest of his wardrobe is intact. There's more. One of the maids, whose business it is to fasten the bedroom windows, declares that she saw Lowen coming *towards* the study through the rose garden about a quarter past six. That would be about ten minutes *before* he left the house."

"What does he himself say to that?"

"Denied first of all that he had ever left the study. But the maid was positive, and he pretended afterwards that he had forgotten just stepping out of the window to examine an unusual species of rose. Rather a weak story! And there's

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fresh evidence against him come to light. Mr. Davenheim always wore a thick gold ring set with a solitaire diamond on the little finger of his right hand. Well, that ring was pawned in London on Saturday night by a petty thief named Billy Kellett! He's already known to the police—did three months last autumn for lifting an old gentleman's watch. It seems he tried to pawn the ring at no less than five different places, succeeded at the last one, got gloriously drunk on the proceeds, assaulted a policeman, and was run in. I went to Bow Street with Miller and saw him. He's sober enough now, and I don't mind admitting we pretty well frightened the life out of him, hinting he might be charged with murder. This is his yarn, and a very queer one it is.

"He was at Entfield races on Saturday, though I dare say wallets and watches were his line of business, rather than betting. Anyway, he had a bad day, and was down on his luck. He was tramping along the road to Chingside and sat down in a ditch to rest just before he got into the village. A few minutes later he noticed a man coming along the road to the village—'dark-complexioned gent, with a big mustache, one of them city toffs,' is his description of the man.

"Kellett was half concealed from the road by a heap of stones. Just before he got abreast of him, the man looked quickly up and down the road, and seeing it apparently deserted he took a small object from his pocket and threw it over the hedge. Then he went on towards the station. Now, the object he had thrown over the hedge had fallen with a slight 'chink' which aroused the curiosity of the human derelict in the ditch. He investigated and after a short search discovered the ring! That is Kellet's story. It's only fair to say that Lowen denies it utterly, and of course the word of a man like Kellett can't be relied upon in the slightest. It's within the bounds of possibility that he met Davenheim in the lane and robbed and murdered him."

Poirot shook his head.

"Very improbable, *mon ami*. He had no means of disposing of the body. It would have been found by now. Secondly, the open way in which he pawned the ring makes it unlikely that he did murder to get it. Thirdly, your sneak thief is rarely a murderer."

Japp nodded. "I don't say you're not right. But all the same, what seems odd to me is that Lowen couldn't find a cleverer way of disposing of the ring."

Poirot shrugged. "Well, after all, if it were found in the neighborhood, it might be argued that Davenheim himself had dropped it."

"But why remove it from the body at all?" I asked.

"There might be a reason for that," said Jap. "Do you know that

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just beyond the lake, a little gate leads out onto the hill, and not three minutes' walk brings you to—what do you think?—a *lime kiln.*"

"Good heavens!" I cried. "You mean that the lime which destroyed the body would be powerless to affect the metal of the ring?"

"Exactly."

"It seems to me," I said, "that that explains everything. What a horrible crime!"

By common consent we both turned and looked at Poirot. He seemed lost in reflection, his brow knitted, as though with some supreme mental effort. I felt that at last his keen intellect was asserting itself. What would his first words be? We were not long left in doubt. With a sigh, the tension of his attitude relaxed, and turning to Japp, he asked, "Have you any idea, my friend, whether Mr. and Mrs. Davenheim occupied the same bedroom?"

The question seemed so ludicrously inappropriate that for a moment we both stared in silence. Then Japp burst into a laugh. "Good Lord, Monsieur Poirot, I thought you were coming out with something startling. As to your question, I'm sure I don't know."

"You could find out?" asked Poirot with curious persistence.

"Oh, certainly—if you *really* want to know."

"Merci, mon ami. I should be obliged if you would make a special point of it."

Japp stared at him, but Poirot seemed to have forgotten us both. The detective shook his head sadly at me, and murmuring, "Poor old fellow! The years have been too much for him!" gently withdrew from the room.

As Poirot still seemed sunk in a daydream, I took a sheet of paper and amused myself by scribbling notes upon it. My friend's voice aroused me. He had come out of his reverie, looking brisk and alert.

"Que faites vous là, mon ami?"

"I was jotting down what occurred to me as the main points of interest in this affair."

"You become methodical—at last!" said Poirot approvingly.

I concealed my pleasure. "Shall I read them to you?"

"By all means."

I cleared my throat.

"'One: All the evidence points to Lowen having been the man who forced the safe.

"'Two: He had a grudge against Davenheim.

"'Three: He lied in his first statement that he had never left the study.

"'Four: If you accept Kellett's story as true, Lowen is unmistakably implicated.'"

I paused. "Well?" I asked, for I felt that I had put my finger on all the vital facts.

Poirot looked at me pityingly, shaking his head very gently. *"Mon pauvre ami!* But it is that you have not the gift! The impor-

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tant detail, you appreciate him never! Also, your reasoning is false."

"How?"

"Let me take your four points. One: Mr. Lowen could not possibly know that he would have the chance to open the safe. He came for a business interview. He could not know beforehand that Mr. Davenheim would be absent posting a letter, and that he would consequently be alone in the study."

"He might have seized his opportunity," I suggested.

"And the tools? City gentlemen do not carry round housebreaker's tools on the off chance! And one could not cut into that safe with a penknife, *bien entendu!*"

"Well, what about Number Two?"

"You say Lowen had a grudge against Mr. Davenheim. What you mean is that Lowen had once or twice got the better of him. And presumably those transactions were entered into with the view of benefiting himself. In any case, you do not as a rule bear a grudge against a man you have got the better of—it is more likely to be the other way about. Whatever grudge there might have been would have been on Mr. Davenheim's side."

"Well, you can't deny that he lied about never having left the study?"

"No. But he may have been frightened. Remember, the missing man's clothes had just been discovered in the lake. Of course, as usual, he would have done better to speak the truth."

"And the fourth point?"

"I grant you that. If Kellett's story is true, Lowen is undeniably implicated. That is what makes the affair so very interesting."

"Then I did appreciate *one* vital fact?"

"Perhaps—but you have entirely overlooked the two most important points, the ones which undoubtedly hold the clue to the whole mystery."

"And what are they?"

"One, the passion which has grown upon Mr. Davenheim in the last few years for buying jewelry. Two, his trip to Buenos Aires last autumn."

"Poirot, you are joking!"

"I am most serious. Ah, sacred thunder, but I hope Japp will not forget my little commission."

But the detective, entering into the spirit of the joke, had remembered it so well that a telegram was handed to Poirot about eleven o'clock the next day. At his request I opened it and read it aloud:

HUSBAND AND WIFE HAVE OCCUPIED SEPARATE ROOMS SINCE LAST WINTER.

"Aha!" cried Poirot. "And now we are in mid-June! All is solved!"

I stared at him.

"You have no money in the bank of Davenheim and Salmon, *mon ami?*"

"No," I said, wondering. "Why?"

"Because I should advise you to

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withdraw it—before it is too late."

"Why, what do you expect?"

"I expect a big smash in a few days—perhaps sooner. Which reminds me, we will return the compliment of a *dépêche* to Japp. A pencil, if you please, and a form. *Voilà!* 'Advise you to withdraw any money deposited with firm in question.' That will intrigue him, the good Japp! His eyes will open wide—wide! He will not comprehend in the slightest—until tomorrow, or the next day!"

I remained skeptical, but the morrow forced me to render tribute to my friend's remarkable powers. In every paper was a huge headline telling of the sensational failure of the Davenheim bank. The disappearance of the famous financier took on a totally different aspect in the light of the revelation of the financial affairs of the bank.

Before we were halfway through breakfast, the door flew open and Japp rushed in. In his left hand was a paper; in his right was Poirot's telegram, which he banged down on the table in front of my friend.

"How did you know, Monsieur Poirot? How the blazes could you know?"

Poirot smiled placidly at him. "Ah, *mon ami,* after your wire, it was a certainty! From the commencement, see you, it struck me that the safe burglary was somewhat remarkable. Jewels, ready money, bearer bonds—all so conveniently arranged—but for whom? Well, the good Monsieur Davenheim was of those who 'look after Number One' as your saying goes! It seemed almost certain that it was arranged for—himself! Then his passion of late years for buying jewelry! How simple! The funds he embezzled, he converted into jewels, very likely replacing them in turn with paste duplicates, and so he put away in a safe place, under another name, a considerable fortune to be enjoyed all in good time when everyone has been thrown off the track. His arrangements completed, he makes an appointment with Mr. Lowen, who has been imprudent enough in the past to cross the great man once or twice, drills a hole in the safe, leaves orders that the guest is to be shown into the study, and walks out of the house—where?"

Poirot stopped, and stretched out his hand for another boiled egg. He frowned. "It is really insupportable," he murmured, "that every hen lays an egg of a different size! What symmetry can there be on the breakfast table? At least they should sort them in dozens at the shop!"

"Never mind the eggs," said Japp impatiently. "Let 'em lay 'em square if they like. Tell us where our customer went to when he left The Cedars—that is, if you know!"

"*Eh bien,* he went to his hiding place. Ah, this Monsieur Davenheim, there may be some malforma-

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tion in his gray cells, but they are of the first quality!"

"Do you know where he is hiding?"

"Certainly! It is most ingenious."

"For the Lord's sake, tell us, then!"

Poirot gently collected every fragment of shell from his plate, placed them in the egg cup, and reversed the empty egg shell on top of them. This little operation concluded, he smiled at the neat effect, then beamed affectionately on us both.

"Come, my friends, you are men of intelligence. Ask yourselves the question which I asked myself. 'If I were this man, where should *I* hide? Hastings, what do you say?"

"Well," I said, "I'm rather inclined to think I'd not do a bolt at all. I'd stay in London—in the heart of things, travel by tubes and buses; ten to one I'd never be recognized. There's safety in a crowd."

Poirot turned inquiringly to Japp.

"I don't agree. Get clear away at once—that's the only chance. I would have had plenty of time to prepare things beforehand. I'd have a yacht waiting, with steam up, and I'd be off to one of the most out-of-the-way corners of the world before the hue and cry began."

We both looked at Poirot. "What do *you* say, monsieur?"

For a moment he remained silent. Then a very curious smile flitted across his face.

"My friends, if *I* were hiding from the police, do you know *where* I should hide? *In a prison!*"

"*What?*"

"You are seeking Monsieur Davenheim in order to put him in prison, so you never dream of looking to see if he may not be already there!"

"What do you mean?"

"You tell me Madame Davenheim is not a very intelligent woman. Nevertheless I think that if you took her to Bow Street and confronted her with the man Billy Kellett, she would recognize him! In spite of the fact that he has shaved his beard and mustache and those bushy eyebrows, and has cropped his hair close. A woman nearly always knows her husband, though the rest of the world may be deceived!"

"Billy Kellett? But he's known to the police!"

"Did I not tell you Davenheim was a clever man? He prepared his alibi long beforehand. He was not in Buenos Aires last autumn—he was creating the character of Billy Kellett, 'doing three months,' so that the police should have no suspicions when the time came. He was playing, remember, for a large fortune, as well as Liberty. It was worthwhile doing the thing thoroughly. Only—"

"Yes?"

"*Eh bien,* afterwards he had to wear a false beard and wig, had to *make up as himself* again, and to sleep with a false beard is not

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easy—it invites detection! He cannot risk continuing to share the chamber of madame his wife. You found out for me that for the last six months, or ever since his supposed return from Buenos Aires, he and Mrs. Davenheim occupied separate rooms. Then I was sure! Everything fitted in. The gardener who fancied he saw his master going round to the side of the house was quite right. He went to the boathouse, donned his 'tramp' clothes, which you may be sure had been safely hidden from the eyes of his valet, dropped the others in the lake, and proceeded to carry out his plan by pawning the ring in an obvious manner, and then assaulting a policeman, getting himself safely into the haven of Bow Street, where nobody would ever dream of looking for him!"

"It's impossible," murmured Japp.

"Ask Madame," said my friend, smiling.

The next day a registered letter lay beside Poirot's plate. He opened it, and a five-pound note fluttered out. My friend's brow puckered.

"Ah, sacré! But what shall I do with it? I have much remorse! *Ce pauvre Japp!* Ah, an idea! We will have a little dinner, we three! That consoles me. It was really too easy. I am ashamed. I, who would not rob a child—*mille tonnerres! Mon ami,* what have you, that you laugh so heartily?"

"O"

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**ANTHONY BOUCHER**
TITLE:	***Command Performance***
TYPE:	Crime Story
LOCALES:	Cincinnati, Salt Lake City, Hollywood
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Eugene Dakin and Jerry Malloy were a big hit in night spots—and then came Stella. The eternal triangle? Not quite . . .*

"SURE I CAN TELL YOU ALL ABOUT it." The voice was high and shrill. "I was there, see? I can give you the whole thing. Only kill that spot! A light like that a trained seal shouldn't work under." The blank staring eyes blinked rapidly.

The captain of detectives started to surge from his chair, but the police psychiatrist laid a pacifying hand on his arm. "Let him tell it this way. We'll learn what we need."

The captain barked, and the overhead glare dimmed to a bearable brightness.

"That's better. I want to help you, see? I want to make a statement. Then you'll understand about Gene, and about Stella and me and everything. You got a guy ready to make with the pothooks? Okay, here goes. Command performance by Jerry Malloy—"

That's my name. I guess that goes first in the statement. Jerry Malloy. Only the statement's mostly about Eugene Dakin, and you got to understand about Gene. It's really on account of his family, see? There's his father that played second leads with Sothern and then had his own Shakespeare company. There's his brother that got in on the ground floor of radio and makes with the comments and knows from everything. There's all the rest of 'em being one kind of big shot or another, and then there's

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originally titled "The Statement of Jerry Malloy"

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baby brother Gene off in a corner, giving the little hello to the company and emptying the ashtrays.

Until he meets up with me. Right away the click, like *that*. We're a team. I'm everything he isn't. I've got all the things he needs even if I am a sawed-off runt—which I'd like to know why we don't think of a yuk like that "sawed-off" when we've still got the act. I'm a born talker-backer, see? I don't give a damn for anybody or anything. I talk the way the clucks out front wish they had the guts to talk, and sweet, quiet little Gene is God's dream of a straight man.

So we're a team, and all of a sudden Gene wakes up in the big time. We're a team, and it isn't just part of the act. I listen to Gene and I talk to him. Sure I rib him some and slip him the old needle, but I treat him like he is somebody for the first time in his life. We sit up all night sometimes after a show, just kicking stuff around and cutting ourselves a slice of happiness. It's a good life, and the moolah that's rolling in is only a part of it. We're seeing the country, kicking around from night spot to night spot—Jerry and Gene in Jests and Jollity—and whether we're in Grand Rapids or Kokomo, we're us, see?

Then in Cincinnati comes in Stella. Any of you guys catch the act? Then you know the spot where the gals in the line come on and I make with the eyes and the cracks. Well, in Cincy there's this kid at the end of the line. She's stacked like the best of 'em; but her make-up's on kind of funny like she isn't used to it, and her eyes have got a softness in them you don't see in night spots. So I'm giving with the Malloy malarkey when all of a sudden I stop and say, "Hey! What am I saying? You ain't my meat, baby. Gene's the joe for you. Ain't that right, Gene?" And Gene turns red like they slipped a gelatin over the spot; but that night I don't sit up talking with him on account of he's taking this kid out to supper—to apologize, he says yet.

So we play four weeks in Cincinnati and when we leave there there's three of us, see? This Stella's a pretty sweet kid, I think at first like a damned jerk. She's been to a finishing school and stuff, only her family goes broke and she isn't trained for anything so her legs get her a job when the finishing won't. It looks like she likes me on account of I introduced them, you might say. I don't get to go to the wedding but I say the right things to her when they come back to the hotel and for two days that's all I see of Gene except when we're on.

Then two nights later he sits up and yatatas to me all night about what a honey of a girl this Stella is. He gives her a buildup like Romeo would've thought twice before he'd say it about Juliet.

"You tell the kid any of this

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stuff?" I ask him. "Must make her feel pretty proud."

"I don't know, Jerry," he says. "Somehow when I'm with her I can't make it come out like this. But I know she understands—"

"Better let me talk to her," I suggest. And I play it for a laugh, only I think both of us are thinking about it from then on.

We're working our way across country, see, playing short stands till we hit this big date here in Hollywood. And something isn't going too good between Gene and Stella. I don't get to see her much, but I somehow latch onto the idea that there's more booing than cooing in that love nest. She doesn't like it when he spends a whole night with me just two days after they're married. So they have words—if Gene has ever got any words to have when he isn't with me—and so he starts spending more time with me and so they have more words and so—See how it goes? And there's nothing I can do. I can't kick him out, can I?

It's in Salt Lake City he starts drinking—which is a hell of a place to start a Ray Milland career, but there's always a bell-boy. Me, I still don't touch the stuff; but we sit up all night and he kills a fifth and comes morning I'm talking as cockeyed thick as he is. So they have words and we play the show and they have more words and he finds another fifth.

I begin to get a glimmering that Stella's not just sore at him—she's jealous of me and she wants to break up the act. But when we hit Hollywood here, I think everything's going to be copacetic. We play the Top Spot out on the Strip, and we find out the Hollywood Names give with the yuks for the same kernels straight off the cob as any other bunch of clucks. And the agents start coming backstage and there's what they call "marked interest at a major studio" and there's a deal all set for TV and everything's so high, wide, and hopeful that even Stella couldn't dream of breaking up the act.

That's what I think.

This night, the night you boys are interested in, Gene's making up before the show and I'm just lying there when Stella comes in. My eyes are shut, see, and I guess I look like I'm out cold so she starts in talking like I wasn't there, which is one thing I never did like about that wench.

"Gene," she says, "this is the time to cut loose. Now you can have all these important people interested in you, you can make the break and go ahead on your own."

"That's absurd, Stella," he says sensibly. "You know I'd be nothing without Jerry."

"Nonsense!" she snorts. "Whatever appeal Jerry has is what you give him. If Jerry's as great as they say he is, then you're great. And I want you to prove it. I want you to be a man—one person, all by your-

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self—my husband that I can be proud of."

They kick this routine back and forth a little without getting anywhere and Stella starts to leave. "You don't love me," she sniffles. "You've never loved anybody but that cocky wizened little runt."

Gene comes over to where I am and makes like he's waking me up. I give Stella the old eye and I say, "'Smatter, baby? Ain'tcha satisfied with your nice new husband? Maybe you better give me a try."

She backs away sudden and Gene says, "Stella! I'd almost think you were afraid of Jerry."

"I am," she gulps, low and tight. "I am afraid—terribly afraid—for you, Gene."

I start to make a crack only my voice kind of changes and I find myself saying, "Listen, Stella. I've known Gene a long time. He doesn't find it very easy to talk. Some people it comes tough with. But take my word for it. He loves you. He loves you very much. He loves you more than anything else in the world."

She stops dead and she says, "Except you." It's the first time she's ever spoken straight at me; but now she doesn't even look at Gene. "Except you," she repeats, slow and steady.

"Even more than me," I have to say. "You're his life and his warmth and his beauty," and I go on like that with words I never knew I had it in me to say until she bursts out sobbing and runs out of the room.

That's the first night Gene ever starts on a fifth before we go into the act. It's a lousy show. We lay enough eggs to bring the market down ten cents a dozen. And after the first show Gene leaves me alone in the dressing room while he goes out to rustle up some more guaranteed egg-producer in fifth bottles.

I'm lying there in the dark, see, when Stella comes in. She leaves the door part way open and there's enough light from the corridor to shine off the blade of the knife she's packing.

I can't move. I'm helpless. All I can do is lie there and watch her come closer and know what she's going to do. I can hear her mutter, "It's the only way out," and then kind of giggle and say, "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul," like it was a quote from something, God knows what.

So I'm lying there and I can't stir and she's coming at me with the knife when all of a sudden there's a crash of breaking glass out in the corridor, where the fire-ax hangs right outside our door.

Then there's Gene standing in the doorway. His right hand is all over blood but it's holding hard onto that fire-ax. Then he's coming into the room and dripping blood over everything, only once he lashes out with that ax there's more blood and it isn't his.

And I still can't move or speak, and I couldn't up till now. So I

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want to thank you boys for giving me back to Gene, on account of that's the only way we could tell you how Stella got killed and you could see it was self-defense.

That's my statement. Now you understand...

The captain of detectives simultaneously shivered and wiped away his sweat. "By all the Saints," he gasped, "there was times there I'd have sworn that—thing was really doing the talking."

"It was, in a way," said the psychiatrist slowly. "Singularly interesting case. I think I might get a good paper out of this," he added, his eyes resting speculatively on Eugene Dakin, the noted ventriloquist, and his famous dummy, Jerry Malloy.

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a new story by

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHORS:	**Frances & Richard LOCKRIDGE**
TITLE:	***All Men Make Mistakes***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Captain Heimrich of the State Police
LOCALE:	Putnam County, New York
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*An automobile accident off a hairpin turn —and sudden death. But "a policeman is no good who doesn't have hunches" . . .*

ALL MEN MAKE MISTAKES—BUT MAY hope, as is so often optimistically said, to profit by them. Captain M. L. Heimrich, of the New York State Police, considered that he had made his share, and without deriving any profit—mistakes in his trade commonly lead to increased obscurity in situations already sufficiently murky. Today's mistake—the mistake he had made an hour or so earlier on a pleasant afternoon in mid-July—was therefore unique. It had proved illuminating.

Surprisingly illuminating, Heimrich thought, as he steered his recently purchased car off NY-11F onto a narrow black-topped road in the Town of Van Horn, County of Putnam. The car purred uphill. Heimrich turned into an even narrower road and continued to climb until the Hudson River lay far below and the road, twisting, clung precariously to the hillside. Off this road, three days before, James Latham had plunged his heavy convertible—off the road and into a deep ravine, where the car landed with wheels in air and Latham under it. Under it and, as was to be expected, dead. The wheels of the car had spun for a time—then spun ever more slowly, as if the

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car itself were slowly dying.

Arthur Madison, powerless to do more, had watched the spinning wheels and, when Police Corporal Ray Crowley arrived, on summons, had told Crowley about it—dully, but as if the fact were important, which of course—it was not. The shocked mind clings to small certainties, as Crowley, although a young man, had already discovered. And Arthur Madison, who had been waiting, white-faced, when the police car arrived, was obviously in a condition of shock.

"He drove right off," Madison told Crowley, after the policeman had found there was nothing to be done for Latham. "As if he hadn't even tried to make the turn." They walked farther up the hill, to Madison's house at the very top. (Blood had run out from under the car, and there was no point in standing and looking at it.) They had walked up a steep, curving driveway. "I stood right here," Madison said, holding out a hand and pointing down the drive. The hand shook. "It was an awful thing to—" He did not finish.

"These things happen," Crowley said, and looked down the drive to where, at right angles, it met the narrow town road. Just before it reached the road, the drive pitched down abruptly. (It would be a mean pull in slippery weather, Crowley thought.) He listened to Madison and could see it happen—see the big convertible, with the top open, go down the steepness of the drive toward the hairpin turn to the road.

"He wasn't going very fast," Madison said. "He slowed for the turn, so it couldn't have been the brakes." The car had started into the turn, which was to the left. And then—

"He quit turning and just drove off," Madison said. "The car—I guess it must have hit a stump or something—it twisted over, almost in a somersault and—" Madison raised both shaking hands and put them over his eyes, as if the sight of the pitching car was still fixed in his eyes. "I ran down," Madison said. "I thought he might have been thrown clear. But—you saw it.

"Jim said to me, 'It looks good. Be seeing you,'" Arthur Madison told Crowley. "He got in the car and started down the drive and—" (The shocked mind marks time by repetition.)

"Yes," Crowley said. "What did he mean, 'It looks good,' Mr. Madison?" That was something to say, something to steady Madison's shaken mind. Madison did not appear to hear him. The question was not worth repeating, but then Madison said, "Oh. A gadget. I invent gadgets. Jim—Jim Latham puts up money for things like that. He'd come to look at this one. I got it out of the shop and showed him how it worked and—"

"Sure," Crowley said. "I see. Had he been drinking?"

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He had not, Madison said, and the medical examiner, after an autopsy the next day, said the same. The autopsy was a routine matter. It was all a routine matter, at the start. It is one of the tasks of the state police to determine the causes of accident. Latham had been, when the car crashed down on him, a sober man, and apparently in excellent health. There had been nothing wrong with his heart. If, starting the turn he had never finished, Latham had suddenly lost consciousness, there was nothing to explain why.

The police turned to the car itself, which was battered but had sustained little structural damage. It would roll again—it was a new car and still rugged—less than one thousand miles showed on the speedometer. And there was nothing to indicate that in those last few seconds it had in any way failed the man who drove it to his death. Nothing was wrong with the steering mechanism, and nothing indicated that the brakes had failed.

The information was duly passed along to Corporal Crowley, at the Van Horn substation of Troop K.

If one is to be a good policeman, which was Ray Crowley's biggest aim in life, one must believe that there is no effect without a cause. A sound car, driven at reasonable speed on a dry road by a sound man, does not willfully plunge into a ravine. That conviction became a burr in Ray Crowley's mind.

An explanation was obvious—James Latham had chosen this method to kill himself. Crowley knew something of Latham by that time. He decided to find out more. When his relief came on that Tuesday evening, with Latham twenty-four hours dead, Crowley changed to civilian clothes and went to talk to people who had known the dead man—unmarried, as it turned out, thirty-eight, reasonably prosperous, living in Peekskill, and, as Madison had said, a man who invested money in things from which he expected to get more money.

"What they call a promoter," Crowley explained the next morning, sitting beside a desk that Captain Heimrich was using in the Hawthorne barracks. Crowley had gone through channels to get to Heimrich, as he had done once or twice before when he had come on something that formed a burr in his mind. "And from what I gather, this man Madison hated his guts. Maybe with reason. Latham sounds like he must have been a smart operator."

"You mean that Madison thought he had been cheated?" Heimrich asked. "Gone into a deal with Latham and perhaps been frozen out? Is that the story going around?"

Crowley said, "Yep."

Heimrich, who prefers people to say "Yes" if that is what they mean, closed his bright blue eyes briefly. Then he said, "Go ahead, Ray."

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"Madison was broke, the story is," Crowley said. "Because he was broke, his wife left him. You'd think a woman who'd do that would be good riddance, but—"

"Now Ray," Heimrich said, "that may have been only what Madison told himself, naturally. Because he didn't want to dig deeper. All the more reason to be bitter at Latham, perhaps. Find someone else to blame."

"I don't know," Crowley said.

"No," Heimrich said. "Neither do I. Hate him enough to kill him, you think? You've talked to people. I haven't. To get him up there to look at a new invention, tell him bygones, and then arrange for him to die?"

"The accident's fishy," Crowley insisted. "Latham doesn't seem to be a man who'd kill himself—at least, there's no reason I heard of. People who knew him say the idea's crazy." Crowley paused. "What it comes to, I guess," he said, "is that I've got a hunch—nothing but a hunch."

"There's nothing wrong with a hunch," Heimrich told him. "A policeman is no good who doesn't have hunches. But—how, Ray? He didn't feed Latham poison and they didn't find anything wrong with the car."

"Mr. Madison's an inventor," Crowley said. He said it with no special confidence. "Maybe— Only, he goes in for household gadgets. Can openers. Things like that."

"No death rays?" Heimrich said. "No devices to guide a car by remote control?"

Crowley blushed. He was still young enough to blush.

"I know," Heimrich said. "But we need something like that, don't we? Something we can put up to Mr. Madison and get him to explain. You haven't been back to talk to him?"

"No," Crowley said. "What's there to ask him about?"

"Nothing," Heimrich said. "Don't go to him, Ray. But mosey around a little more. Listen to some more things. I'll fix it with your sergeant. I think maybe you're a good man with a hunch, Corporal."

Ray Crowley went to "mosey." Heimrich returned to another investigation—one which had simmered down to a need for proof, and for that only. To prove what one knows is often a tedious business; fortunately, it is almost always possible.

Heimrich was still in search of proof in this other matter, at about three o'clock Thursday afternoon. He was in Peekskill looking for a place to park, and it was then he made his mistake. It was, he thought at the time, a very foolish mistake. Half a block ahead he saw a car begin to pull out from the curb and since there was a car a little behind him which also seemed to have parking on its mind, Heimrich hurried. He turned into the vacant space, to establish

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his claim, with further maneuvering to come. He went in rather rapidly, and put his brakes on.

And ran right up on the curb.

In fact, he ran over the curb and even a little way onto the sidewalk before he could bring his car to a stop. It was as if the car, so exceptionally docile during the two months he had driven it, had sought to wrench itself from his hands. And had momentarily succeeded.

Heimrich slid the gear selector to reverse and was conscious that people on the sidewalk—although he had not, fortunately, endangered anyone—looked at him with resentment and, he supposed, contempt. A man shook his head pityingly. Heimrich found that his motor was dead, which did nothing to lessen his embarrassment. He started the motor, backed off the sidewalk, parked—and now the car was its responsive self again. Then he started to go about his business.

But he did not.

Instead, he sat for some seconds regarding the dashboard. He told himself he'd be damned, then pulled out and drove to a service station. The head mechanic listened and said, "Sure."

"Sure," he said. "What did you think, Captain? Power steering works off the motor. If the motor stalls you're back in conventional steering. But you're not set for that, see, not after you've got used to the easy way. Makes even this baby"—he patted Heimrich's car with affection—"handle like a truck. Happened to a man I know and before he could adjust to it he was—"

"But why," Heimrich said, "should my motor stall? The car was moving and it's a new car too."

"Most likely," the mechanic said, opening the hood and looking inside, "just needs an adjustment. See? Take your foot off the accelerator and this rod"—he pointed—"bounces back and cuts off the gas. But not all the way off, 'cause then you stall. This little rubber gimmick, see, is supposed to stop it in time. What's happened here is"—he took out pliers—"just needs to be reset." He used the pliers, pulled the accelerator rod, and the motor roared. He released the rod and the motor purred. "That's all there is to it, Captain," and he closed the hood.

"A man," Heimrich said, "could tinker with that so a car would stall?"

"Sure," said the mechanic. "But what would anybody want to do that for?"

"And you say a car with power steering, and the motor dead, would handle like a truck? On a curve, say, when you weren't set for it?"

"Just like I told you, Captain. This man I know had it happen. Ran into a tree and—"

Heimrich thanked him and found a telephone; he asked that Corporal Ray Crowley be found, and instructed. Then he drove

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north in his recently purchased car, with power steering—with power steering of the same type that had been in the heavy convertible under which James Latham had died. Heimrich drove on NY-11F until he came to a narrow, black-topped road which climbed steeply toward the lonely house of Arthur Madison, gadget inventor. Crowley would meet him there, which was only fair to the young corporal with the hunch.

"What would anybody want to do that for?" The automobile mechanic had asked. Heimrich had not answered. But the answer was, he thought, very obvious—and very ugly. It would, naturally, be difficult to prove, if Madison stuck to his guns. Fortunately for policemen, amateur murderers seldom do, once one knows exactly what questions to ask. A knotted lie unravels easily when one knows which strand to tug at...

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **PEGGY MCINTYRE**

TITLE: ***Hand on My Shoulder***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Suburb of London

TIME: A generation ago

COMMENTS: *A story compounded of backstage intrigue, unscrupulous ambition, death and drama, the sweet uses of adversity, and a phantom rehearsal — or was it hallucination?*

NO, I WOULDN'T CALL MYSELF A religious man. But I have known guidance . . . the absolute certainty that some power greater than myself was forcing me gently along the right path, smoothing my way. Not for my own sake! Oh, no, Albert Adamson, the man, is of no interest to this—what shall I call it?—this concept. It is my talent, my grain of genius, that deserves the help it has had.

I can describe a case in point—the most vivid experience of its kind that I have encountered. It happened at the very beginning of my career. In fact, you might say that it was the beginning of my career.

I am a man of humble origins, as you are probably aware. I came from tradespeople, and before I was thirty had forced my way up to the position of stage manager for the finest producer of the day. But I had determined to become a playwright and nothing short would content me.

So I wrote my plays at night when my work was done. Oh, those days, those days! The reams of paper, the gallons of ink, the landlady's complaints about wasted gas! But I wrote and discarded, wrote and discarded, until one daybreak I found myself staring at what I knew was my first good play. Mark you, I *knew*. The power of which I speak was beckoning me forward and I had nothing to do but follow.

I took my play to Alan Lansdowne. I can feel the weight of that parcel still. Five acts it was, and

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meaty. None of your two acts and pauses for psychology in those days! Action, the public wanted, and action it got. I have always believed in strong situations and strong curtains.

So I took my first-born to Lansdowne. Oh, he was a difficult man! But a great producer. Shaw, Ibsen, Galsworthy—he did them all. I had been his stage manager for six years at that time. I was a cocky youngster, full of grit, but I tell you my knees were shaking when I laid that play on his desk.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Your opening play for next season," I said. He knew what I was up to. Just cocked that bright, bright eye at me and half grinned.

"All right, Bert," he said. "Leave it with me and I'll have a look at it."

Two days later he told me that he would do it.

Now, you would imagine that I was happy beyond expression. My first play to be produced by the great Alan Lansdowne. Assured success. Because the piece was good, I had no doubt about that. But I was deeply troubled in spite of my elation.

We were down at Bridge House at the time. It has long since vanished under a drift of little radish houses, like so much else of importance in our history. But in those days it was the cultural heart of London, for all that it was fifteen miles from town. Only Alan could have brought the public out there, but they flocked and it suited him well. He lived there, you see, and owned the theater. It was a small place that seated only six hundred, but with a good stage. I lived at Bridge House, too, while we were running, and two weeks before we went into rehearsal for my own play I moved out there. I was ready to fight, but I had not realized how desperate the battle would be.

It was a question of casting. Have you read my first play? Then you remember the leading woman. A child of seventeen when the piece opens. And Alan insisted that Molly, his wife, should play it. Molly! Forty if she was a day! It wasn't good enough. I said so, and he was furious.

"Why, you little counter jumper," he shouted, "I'll have you know that Molly's one of the finest actresses in England!"

"She was," I said.

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"Molly's good, but she can't play this child!" I had a temper myself in those days. "You know that as well as I do. But you were fool enough to let her get a look at the part, and now she's set her heart on it and you daren't tell her she's too old, because if you do she'll go back to the bottle."

He went chalky at that and told me to get out and take my filthy play with me. But I was too excited to stop. "She's ruining you,"

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I cried, "and I'm wasting my time! Chuck the play away. No one else will do it, and you can't. Because even if I could make you see reason, Molly would never let you bring a good juvenile out here. Not after Ethel Mason, she wouldn't!"

And this was the moment when something started to help me, though of course I didn't realize it at the time. Thirty seconds more and he would have put me out of his office, because I had gone too far and we both knew it. But at that moment there was a rap at the door, and in walked Molly.

"I didn't mean to interrupt you, dear," she said. "Good morning, Bert. I'm off to town for the day. Fittings, you know, and pictures, and all sorts of odd jobs. But I wanted to remind you about Sutherland and Snow."

Molly was a perfect lady. Little and refined and terrified of her own shadow. A fine actress when she could keep away from the bottle, and most of the time she did. But she was unable to face failure. One bad notice and she would lie in a drunken stupor for a week.

But she had been well for the past six months, and this morning she didn't so much as flinch when Alan swore at her.

"Who in hell are Sutherland and Snow?" he snapped.

"Oh, you remember, dear."

"Those ghastly females who wrote that indecent play?"

Even that didn't upset her. She was happy that day. I like to remember that.

"Now, darling," she said. "Don't be difficult. You know you asked them down to talk about their new play. I had Murphy show them into the garden. I'm afraid I dodged them because I've got that train to catch. Bert must help you with them because it's his fault that I have to go up to town." She had great eyes like lamps and she turned them on me. "I'm so excited about this part, Bert," she said. "I want the dresses to be just right. I know you're doubtful about me, but I can play it. Truly I can. I love it so. It'll be my finest performance."

I started to speak, but Alan bustled her off. She climbed into a four-wheeler at the front door and we went out by the side to deal with the ladies in the garden. I was in control of myself again. With Molly out of the way till evening, I thought I could talk Alan round.

Sutherland and Snow! What a pair they were! Do maiden ladies still write transpontine melodrama, I wonder? Those two were experts. Rape, seduction, murder, incest—they got it all onto paper while they licked their lips. Normally, of course, Alan would never have considered their plays, but their first, *The Demon Lover,* had made a fortune, and I had been right when I said Molly was ruining him; his last season had been disastrous. But how he hated them! Snow squealing and Sutherland snapping until

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he was nearly demented. Finally, Sutherland marched him off to talk business while I was left to entertain Snow.

She must have been fifty, and I was still in my twenties, but that didn't prevent her from fluttering her eyelashes at me. I could think of nothing better to do than offer to show her round the theater.

So, for the second time, my path was being cleared.

We went all over the establishment. Snow chattering away like a starling. Props room, dressing rooms, wardrobe — everything. At last we came down the long dark passage toward the stage. It smelled of grease paint and size, as theaters always do. Magic, to those who can feel it. Oddly enough, Miss Snow could. Her voice became hushed and she clutched at my arm.

"Oh, this historic stage, Mr. Adamson," she murmured. "Where so many great plays have first seen the footlights! Mr. Adamson, I assure you I feel greatness in the air."

We went through the door and out onto the center of the stage. It was chill and empty as usual, but with that air of expectancy that theaters have. Miss Snow seemed a little let down.

"Small, isn't it?" she said.

"As a matter of fact, it's a fair size for a house that seats only six hundred," I said. She began to wander to and fro, looking about her. "Careful," I said. "Don't get too near the floats."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Don't go too close to the edge of the stage. That orchestra pit is dangerously deep."

Now really she was not very close to the edge and I had not intended to start talking about it. But Ethel Mason was strong in my mind that day. Miss Snow snapped it up immediately.

"The orchestra pit?" she said. "Wasn't there something . . . ? An accident of some kind?"

"A young actress was killed in a fall here five years ago."

She drew her breath in sharply. "I remember now. Such a promising talent. A tragedy. But why has not Mr. Lansdowne made alterations to the orchestra pit?"

I did my best to explain that there was very little Alan could do without ruining the rake of the stage. "In any case," I said, "it could never happen again."

"Just how did it happen?" she asked, edging closer. I was beginning to feel uncomfortable. The sensation of the theater waiting for something was stronger than ever.

"No one knows," I said. "She was alone on the stage at the time. The coroner thought it must have been a fainting fit, or something of the kind. She'd been working too hard." Indeed she had. Alan was like a madman when it came to driving real talent. "I came in that evening and found her lying in the pit." And though I'd said it as flatly as I could, the picture jumped into

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my mind. That limp bundle of clothes in the dusty pit, and her head thrown back and her eyes wide open, staring up at the stage. I think Miss Snow felt something even then.

"A horrible experience," she murmured.

"She was a good girl, Ethel," I said. "If you'd like to come up to Lansdowne's office, I'll show you a picture of her. Down these steps. Careful now, the light's not good."

I guided her down the steps and up through the stalls. In the foyer we met Sutherland.

"There you are!" she bellowed at me. "I was coming to look for you. Mr. Lansdowne wants you. Snow, it's too bad of you! You knew I wanted first look at the theater!"

And off she went across the foyer, poor little Snow trotting after her. I went upstairs to find Alan.

He was calmer, but he had not changed his mind. Round and round the argument went, wearing us out and arriving at no conclusion. He refused to consider anyone but Molly for that part, and I made it clear that I would rather throw my chance away than let her do it. It was a horrible passage for me. At any time he might raise his head and say, "Well, Bert, I'm sorry, but . . ." and I would be finished before I had begun.

Then the door flew open, banging against the wall. We started out of our chairs. Sutherland broke into the room, supporting her half-fainting friend.

"You're all right now," she said, helping her to a chair. "Nothing's going to hurt you."

"Oh, I'm going to faint; I know I am," whimpered Miss Snow.

"Shove her head between her legs," said Alan, coming round the corner of his desk. Miss Snow clutched her skirt and glared at him. In their plays that kind of suggestion led to only one thing. Sutherland brushed Alan aside and demanded brandy.

"Now," said Alan, when brandy had been provided and Miss Snow was sipping it, "perhaps one of you would tell us what happened."

"We got a nasty shock," said Sutherland. "Hold you to blame, Mr. Lansdowne—you alone."

Alan and I looked blank.

"Irresponsible behavior, I call it. You distinctly told me the theater was empty. I'm not at all sure it wouldn't be a sound idea to consult my attorneys. Snow has a weak heart. It might have finished her."

Miss Snow hastened to soothe her. "Oh, no, dear! Please don't let us have trouble and harsh words. Mr. Lansdowne simply forgot, that's all. And Mr. Adamson."

"Forgot what?" asked Alan.

"About the rehearsal. You should have warned us."

"Rehearsal?"

"During our tour of a theater which we had been assured was completely empty, we stumbled

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upon the rehearsal of a violent, and I may say in view of what Snow had been telling me, a peculiarly tasteless scene. It alarmed us very much. I am not at all inclined to accept Snow's charitable view that you had a fit of forgetfulness."

"That poor child!" chimed in Miss Snow. "How can you allow your actors to perform such a scene, Mr. Lansdowne?"

She got no answer—we could do nothing but stare at her. So she went on. "My heart toppled, absolutely toppled! And I cannot for the life of me see how it is done. Surely, it is very dangerous."

Suddenly I was perspiring all over, and my scalp tingled. I glanced at Alan, but he sat rigid. I turned to Miss Snow.

"When I left you in the foyer, you and Miss Sutherland went back to the theater?"

"Yes," she said. "We went through the doors from the foyer and started down the center aisle."

"And just what did you see?"

"Well," she said, "we were about halfway down the aisle, I would say, and I was looking up at the stage and telling Sutherland the tragic story you had told me, when suddenly this girl dashed out from the side."

"The wings, Snow," said Sutherland.

"Yes, of course, dear, the wings. She ran out to the front of the stage and stood there for a second with her back to me. You could tell she was terrified. And then suddenly another woman came toward her from the shadows."

And at this point, though it's hard to credit, she stopped again and turned to Alan. "It really is a very nasty scene, Mr. Lansdowne," she said reprovingly. "I cannot think anyone will enjoy it."

Alan just made a waving movement with his hand. I had to speak.

"This second woman—what did she do?"

"She came down the stage to the girl. The poor child just stood there with her hands over her face. I could see the material of her dress quivering. The older woman reached her, stretched out her hands. She seemed very strong, though she was only a small person. She placed her hands on the girl's shoulders and quite slowly and deliberately forced her back over the edge of the stage. Horrible!"

She stopped again and looked at us. We were quite incapable of speech. She turned to Sutherland, who also stared at us. Disaster was settling over that room like a fog.

"You know," said Snow, turning her eyes down and twisting her brandy glass, "looking back, there was a peculiar atmosphere about the whole thing. Everything seemed to have stopped. I couldn't even hear the normal sounds I had been hearing up till then. And the light had changed. It was brighter, yet flat in a strange sort of way."

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"Snow yelped," said Sutherland, and her voice seemed loud. "I hurried to her."

"I'd covered my face with my hands, and when I took them away I could hear the lawn mower outside again. The theater was dark and the two women had . . . well, gone away. The whole scene lasted only a few seconds. It was a queer kind of rehearsal."

They knew, all right. We were too shocked to save the situation.

Sutherland was the only one with enough courage to say it.

"*Was* it a rehearsal, Mr. Lansdowne?"

That brought me back to life. I don't know why. I glanced at Alan and saw no help there. I said nothing, but crossing to the wall beside his desk I took down a picture and handed it to Miss Snow.

"Yes," she said, as I had known she would. "Yes, that's the girl I saw. Pretty little thing." She looked up at me and I saw tears in her eyes. "Is this Ethel Mason?"

I nodded. No one said anything.

Through that long hot afternoon I toiled. Miss Snow cried, Sutherland paced up and down the room and stormed at all of us. Alan remained motionless in his chair. When at last I got the ladies sufficiently calmed to be left in the drawing room with tea, and went back to the office, he had not moved.

"Alan," I said, "you've got to pull yourself together."

"Yes."

"It's absolutely vital to decide what line we're going to take."

He moved slightly then, and finally looked up at me. He had aged twenty years, but he grinned.

"What line can we take? I haven't any views on ghosts, have you, Bert? I've just strolled through life without thinking about them one way or another."

I tried to reassure him. "Miss Snow has seen things before, you know," I said. "Several times, apparently. But she's such a hysterical type that no one would believe her."

"She recognized Ethel's picture."

"She knew it was there—I'd told her so myself. Then there's the fact that she'd heard all about Ethel's death before she saw the ghosts, or whatever they were. Oh, I think we can deal with her."

"Talk her out of it, you mean?"

"Force her to keep quiet. Sutherland's no fool, you know, and they've got this new play to peddle."

He sat up straight and a little color came back into his face.

"I won't be blackmailed into doing that play, Bert."

"Have I suggested it? But it can't do any harm to consider it. If it's good enough you'd do it in any case, and it would ease the situation."

He leaned back in his chair again.

"Do the best you can, Bert. Only, for God's sake get them away. I don't want to clap eyes on them."

"Right," I said, "I'll fix up something. And then we can get down to the real problem."

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He said nothing to that, but I was too absorbed to notice.

Dealing with Sutherland and Snow took the rest of the afternoon and a good part of the evening. I have never worked harder before or since. But I did it. They went off to catch the last London train with good dinners under their belts and good will to men all round. I waved them goodbye at the front door and then went up to the office two steps at a time. Oh, I was proud of myself.

Alan was staring out of the window.

"That's that," I said. "They've gone."

"Thanks, Bert."

"I did a good job. Not a word to be said, and you're not committed to doing their play."

I helped myself to a brandy and soda. I needed it.

"Will they make trouble in the future?" asked Alan.

"Not a chance, old man. Sutherland knows which side of her bread has butter on it. She's interested in selling their latest blood. A reputation for seeing ghosts won't help them, and she knows it."

I took a pull at my drink and filled my pipe. It was a beautiful evening and I was as contented as I have ever been in my life. Alan came away from the window.

"Molly's train gets in soon," he said. "Will you meet her for me? I'm fagged out."

"Of course, old man," I said. Then I put down my glass and tried to edge the subject toward him gently. "Have you decided yet what you're going to do?"

He just looked at me.

"Do about what?"

"About Molly, of course."

Then he shocked me.

"Why should I do anything about Molly?"

I stood up. It was difficult to believe.

"I quite see that you don't want to talk about it. But, after all, it's a miracle we found out like this. It can be dealt with quietly. Confinement of some kind, I suppose. Not an asylum, of course, but . . ." He wasn't listening to me. I stopped.

"Bert, you believed that Snow woman, didn't you?" he said.

"It's not a question of believing, really," I replied uncomfortably.

"You're convinced that Molly killed Ethel, aren't you?"

Perhaps it was because he said it straight from the shoulder like that. At any rate, I felt firm ground.

"I'm not a fool," I said. "I can see the truth when it's pushed under my nose."

"Can you?"

"I can. And so can you, though you don't want to admit it. We accepted Ethel's death as an accident at the time. Why shouldn't we? The idea of someone you know as well as we know Molly killing another human being doesn't enter one's head. But when Miss Snow came along with her story, the

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truth of it was unmistakable. Molly killed Ethel."

"No," he said.

"Oh, yes she did," I said easily. "And we both know why. You and Ethel were in love with each other. It meant everything to you. I saw it. You can't argue with me."

"I'm not arguing."

"That six months while Molly was in America, and you and Ethel were working together, you did the finest job of your life. Then Molly came back, recognized the situation, began to drink, and before anyone had time to catch a breath, Ethel met with a fatal accident. Face facts, man, face facts!"

He made no attempt to answer me, but turned back to the window and went on staring. I drove my point home.

"That's why I say this is a miracle. Sutherland and Snow won't talk. I got them away before they could see Molly and recognize her as the other woman. It won't be difficult to make an excuse for Molly going into a home—breakdown, anything you like. It will be merciful, really. And no one will ever know anything at all about it."

Alan turned round and again he was grinning.

"It would certainly be convenient, wouldn't it, Bert?"

I was deeply shocked. "Don't talk like that," I said sharply. "She's your wife, remember, no matter what she's done."

"That's just it," he said. "She hasn't done anything."

I stared at him.

"She didn't kill Ethel, you know. She didn't have to."

"But Miss Snow . . ."

His temper was beginning to come up again now. "The Snow woman is a hysterical spinster with her head full of blood and thunder and her mind stuffed with gossip by you, dear old loyal Bert. I tell you, Molly did *not* kill Ethel, ghost or no ghost. Why should she? I'd never leave her under any circumstances. That six months with Ethel was over the moment Molly set foot in the place again. I knew it, Ethel knew it, and Molly knew it when she sobered up enough to think."

"All very noble," I said. "But I don't believe a word of it. You're not a saint—why should you throw your life away for the sake of a drunken has-been?"

"Because I want to," he said.

We sat and glared at each other.

"So you're not going to do anything," I said at last.

"Nothing."

"She killed the only woman you've ever loved, she's slowly but surely wrecking your life's work, you've got the best excuse a man ever had to get her quietly into a home—where she should have been years ago—and you're not going to do anything."

"Nothing," he repeated. The crisis had come at last.

"And neither will you, Bert," he

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said. How I loathed that grin! "There's nothing you can do. You dealt with those women so faithfully that neither of them would open their mouths now to save their lives. Especially when I'm standing out in full view, saying that you'd had too much brandy and imagined the whole thing."

"You'd do that?"

"I'd do that."

"You're a fool," I snapped.

"I expect so. But you can't change my mind. You're stuck, Bert. I'm going to bed. Meet Molly for me, like a good chap."

I watched him walk to the door. Then it came.

"Oh, by the way, I want to talk to you again about that first act. You're right about Molly, up to a point. She can't play a seventeen-year-old. We'll have to do a bit of rewriting and bring the girl's age up five years or so. Good night, Bert, and thanks again."

And I was staring at a closed door.

Finished.

Or not?

I sat by the empty fireplace, smoked my pipe, and thought.

And I was guided.

I went to meet Molly.

My path was smoothed every step of the way. Because it was not an easy road I was treading. If Alan had heard her, he'd have come down and I would have lost everything. But he slept like the dead.

Molly had a drink after she heard my story. I told it well, you know. I led her to believe that Alan had gone to look at nursing homes.

It needed very little more.

I knew she had sleeping pills.

She was found the next morning. Overdose, they called it.

Alan knew, of course, but he said nothing. How could he?

It is an interesting story, isn't it? I firmly believe I was guided. But if I were not such a very old man, I would never have told it. People are sometimes funny about that sort of thing.

Alan came through it well enough. He married again—a fine woman who was of great help to him. He was knighted before he died, if you remember. He never did another play of mine after that first one. I believe he would not have done that one if he hadn't been desperate for money, but it made a small fortune for both of us, as he was sure it would.

As for me, I never looked back.

There was a strange thing, though. Miss Snow was the one to end in the asylum. Yes, two years later she started seeing too many things entirely, so they took her away and locked her up. It gave me a jolt at the time, I admit. I mean, suppose Alan had been right about Molly? But I soon saw that was impossible.

Yes, it was a strange affair. But definitely providential.

Molly would have ruined that part.

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***The Father Brown story most admired by the late James Hilton, author of such beloved books as* GOODBYE, MR. CHIPS *and* LOST HORIZON**

THE ABSENCE OF MR. GLASS

by G. K. CHESTERTON

THE CONSULTING ROOMS OF DR. Orion Hood, the eminent criminologist and specialist in certain moral disorders, lay along the sea front at Scarborough, in a series of very large and well-lighted French windows, which showed the North Sea like one endless outer wall of blue-green marble. In such a place the sea had something of the monotony of a blue-green dado: for the chambers themselves were ruled throughout by a terrible tidiness not unlike the terrible tidiness of the sea.

It must not be supposed that Dr. Hood's apartments excluded luxury, or even poetry. These things were there, in their place; but one felt that they were never allowed out of their place. Luxury was there: there stood upon a special table eight or ten boxes of the best cigars; but they were built upon a plan so that the strongest were always nearest the wall and the mildest nearest the window. A tantalus containing three kinds of spirit, all of a liqueur excellence, stood always on this table of luxury; but the fanciful have asserted that the whiskey, brandy, and rum seemed always to stand at the same level. Poetry was there: the left-hand corner of the room was lined with as complete a set of English classics as the right hand could show of English and foreign physiologists. But if one took a volume of Chaucer or Shelley from that rank, its absence irritated the mind like a gap in a man's front teeth. One could not say the books were never read; probably they were, but there was a sense of their being chained to their places, like the Bibles in the old churches. Dr. Hood treated his private book-shelf as if it were a public library. And if this strict scientific intangibility steeped even the shelves laden with lyrics and ballads and the tables laden with drink and tobacco, it goes without saying that yet more of such heathen holiness protected the other shelves that held the specialist's library, and the other tables that sustained the frail and even fairylike instruments of chemistry or mechanics.

Dr. Orion Hood paced the length of his string of apartments,

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bounded—as the boys' geographies say—on the east by the North Sea and on the west by the serried ranks of his sociological and criminologist library. He was clad in an artist's velvet, but with none of an artist's negligence; his hair was heavily shot with gray, but growing thick and healthy; his face was lean, but sanguine and expectant. Everything about him and his room indicated something at once rigid and restless, like that great Northern Sea by which (on pure principles of hygiene) he had built his home.

Fate, being in a funny mood, pushed the door open and introduced into those long, strict, sea-flanked apartments one who was perhaps the most startling opposite of them and their master. In answer to a curt but civil summons, the door opened inwards and there shambled into the room a shapeless little figure, which seemed to find its own hat and umbrella as unmanageable as a mass of luggage. The umbrella was a black and prosaic bundle long past repair, the hat was a broad-curved black hat, clerical but not common in England, the man was the very embodiment of all that is homely and helpless.

The doctor regarded the newcomer with a restrained astonishment, not unlike that he would have shown if some huge but obviously harmless sea beast had crawled into his room. The newcomer regarded the doctor with that beaming but breathless geniality which characterizes a corpulent char-woman who has just managed to stuff herself into an omnibus. It is a rich confusion of social self-congratulation and bodily disarray. His hat tumbled to the carpet, his heavy umbrella slipped between his knees with a thud; he reached after the one and ducked after the other, but with an unimpaired smile on his round face spoke simultaneously as follows:

"My name is Brown. Pray excuse me. I come about that business of the MacNabs. I have heard you often help people out of such troubles. Pray excuse me if I am wrong."

By this time he had sprawlingly recovered the hat, and made an odd little bobbing bow over it, as if setting everything quite right.

"I hardly understand you," replied the scientist, with a cold intensity of manner. "I fear you have mistaken the chambers. I am Dr. Hood, and my work is almost entirely literary and educational. It is true that I have sometimes been consulted by the police in cases of peculiar difficulty and importance, but—"

"Oh, this is of the greatest importance," broke in the little man called Brown. "Why, her mother won't let them get engaged." And he leaned back in his chair in radiant rationality.

The brows of Dr. Hood were

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drawn down darkly, but the eyes under them were bright with something that might be anger or might be amusement. "And still," he said, "I do not quite understand."

"You see, they want to get married," said the man with the clerical hat. "Maggie MacNab and young Todhunter want to get *married*. Now, what can be more important than that?"

The great Orion Hood's scientific triumphs had deprived him of many things—some said of his health, others of his God; but they had not wholly despoiled him of his sense of the absurd. At the last plea of the ingenuous priest a chuckle broke out of him from inside, and he threw himself into an armchair in an ironical attitude of the consulting physician.

"Mr. Brown," he said gravely, "it is quite fourteen and a half years since I was personally asked to test a personal problem: then it was the case of an attempt to poison the French President at a Lord Mayor's Banquet. It is now, I understand, a question of whether some friend of yours called Maggie is a suitable fiancée for some friend of hers called Todhunter. Well, Mr. Brown, I am a sportsman. I will take it on. I will give the MacNab family my best advice, as good as I gave the French Republic and the King of England—no, better: fourteen years better. I have nothing else to do this afternoon. Tell me your story."

The little clergyman called Brown thanked him with unquestionable warmth, but still with a queer kind of simplicity. It was rather as if he were thanking a stranger in a smoking room for some trouble in passing the matches, than as if he were (as he was) practically thanking the Curator of Kew Gardens for coming with him into a field, to find a four-leaved clover. With scarcely a semi-colon after his hearty thanks, the little man began his recital:

"I told you my name was Brown; well, that's the fact, and I'm the priest of the little Catholic Church I dare say you've seen beyond those straggly streets, where the town ends towards the north. In the last and straggliest of those streets which runs along the sea like a sea wall there is a very honest but rather sharp-tempered member of my flock, a widow called MacNab. She has one daughter, and she lets lodgings; and between her and the daughter, and between her and the lodgers—well, I dare say there is a great deal to be said on both sides. At present she has only one lodger, the young man called Todhunter; but he has given more trouble than all the rest, for he wants to marry the young woman of the house."

"And the young woman of the house," asked Dr. Hood, with huge and silent amusement, "what does she want?"

"Why, she wants to marry him," cried Father Brown, sitting up

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eagerly. "That is just the awful complication."

"It is indeed a hideous enigma," said Dr. Hood.

"This young James Todhunter," continued the cleric, "is a very decent man so far as I know; but then nobody knows very much. He is a bright, brownish little fellow, agile like a monkey, clean-shaven like an actor, and obliging like a born courier. He seems to have quite a pocketful of money, but nobody knows what his trade is. Mrs. MacNab, therefore (being of a pessimistic turn), is quite sure it is something dreadful, and probably connected with dynamite. The dynamite must be of a shy and noiseless sort, for the poor fellow only shuts himself up for several hours of the day and studies something behind a locked door. He declares his privacy is temporary and justified, and promises to explain before the wedding. That is all that anyone knows for certain, but Mrs. MacNab will tell you a great deal more than even she is certain of. You know how the tales grow like grass on such a patch of ignorance as that. There are tales of two voices heard talking in the room; though, when the door is opened, Todhunter is always found alone. There are tales of a mysterious tall man in a silk hat, who once came out of the sea mists and apparently out of the sea, stepping softly across the sandy fields and through the small back garden at twilight, till he was heard talking to the lodger at his open back window. The colloquy seemed to end in a quarrel: Todhunter dashed down his window with violence, and the man in the high hat melted into the sea fog again. This story is told by the family with the fiercest mystification, but I really think Mrs. MacNab prefers her own original tale: that the Other Man (or whatever it is) crawls out every night from the big box in the corner, which is kept locked all day. You see, therefore, how this sealed door of Todhunter's is treated as the gate of all the fancies and monstrosities of the *Thousand and One Nights*. And yet there is the little fellow in his respectable-black jacket, as punctual and innocent as a parlor clock. He pays his rent to the tick; he is practically a teetotaler; he is tirelessly kind with the younger children, and can keep them amused for a day on end; and, last and most urgent of all, he has made himself equally popular with the eldest daughter, who is ready to go to church with him tomorrow."

A man warmly concerned with any large theories has always a relish for applying them to any triviality. The great specialist, having condescended to the priest's simplicity, condescended expansively. He settled himself with comfort in his armchair and began to talk in the tone of a somewhat absent-minded lecturer:

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"Even in a minute instance it is best to look first to the main tendencies of Nature. A particular flower may not be dead in early winter, but the flowers are dying; a particular pebble may never be wetted with the tide, but the tide is coming in. To the scientific eye all human history is a series of collective movements, destructions or migrations, like the massacre of flies in winter or the return of birds in spring. Now the root fact in all history is Race. Race produces religion; Race produces legal and ethical wars. There is no stronger case than that of the wild, unwordly, and perishing stock which we commonly call the Celts, of whom your friends the MacNabs are specimens. Small, swarthy, and of this dreamy and drifting blood, they accept easily the superstitious explanation of any incidents, just as they still accept (you will excuse me for saying) that superstitious explanation of all incidents which you and your Church represent. It is not remarkable that such people, with the sea moaning behind them and the Church (excuse me again) droning in front of them, should put fantastic features into what are probably plain events. You, with your small parochial responsibilities, see only this particular Mrs. MacNab, terrified with this particular tale of two voices and a tall man out of the sea. But the man with the scientific imagination sees, as it were, the whole clan of MacNabs scattered over the whole world, in its ultimate average as uniform as a tribe of birds. He sees thousands of Mrs. MacNabs, in thousands of houses, dropping their little drop of morbidity in the tea cups of their friends; he sees—"

Before the scientist could conclude his sentence, another and more impatient summons sounded from without; someone with swishing skirts was marshaled hurriedly down the corridor, and the door opened on a young girl, decently dressed but disordered and red-hot with haste. She had sea-blown blonde hair, and would have been entirely beautiful if her cheekbones had not been, in the Scotch manner, a little high in relief as well as in color. Her apology was almost as abrupt as a command.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, sir," she said; 'but I had to follow Father Brown at once; it's nothing less than life or death."

Father Brown began to get to his feet in some disorder. "Why, what has happened, Maggie?" he said.

"James has been murdered, for all I can make out," answered the girl, still breathing hard from her rush. "That man Glass has been with him again; I heard them talking through the door quite plain. Two separate voices; for James speaks low, with a burr, and the other voice was high and quavery." She caught her breath.

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"That man Glass?" repeated the priest in some perplexity.

"I know his name is Glass," answered the girl, in great impatience. "I heard it through the door. They were quarreling—about money, I think—for I heard James say again and again, 'That's right, Mr. Glass,' or 'No, Mr. Glass,' and then, 'Two and three, Mr. Glass.' But we're talking too much; you must come at once, and there may be time yet."

"But time for what?" asked Dr. Hood, who had been studying the young lady with marked interest. "What is there about Mr. Glass and his money troubles that should impel such urgency?"

"I tried to break down the door and couldn't," answered the girl shortly. "Then I ran round to the backyard, and managed to climb on to the window sill that looks into the room. It was all dim, and seemed to be empty, but I swear I saw James lying huddled up in a corner, as if he were drugged or strangled."

"This is very serious," said Father Brown, gathering up his hat and umbrella and standing up. "In point of fact, I was just putting your case before this gentleman, and his view—"

"Has been largely altered," said the scientist gravely. "I do not think this young lady is so Celtic as I had supposed. As I have nothing else to do, I will put on my hat and stroll down the town with you."

In a few minutes all three were approaching the dreary tail of the MacNabs' street; the girl with the stern and breathless stride of the mountaineer, the criminologist with a lounging grace (which was not without a certain leopard-like swiftness), and the priest at an energetic trot entirely devoid of distinction. The aspect of this edge of the town was not entirely without justification for the doctor's hints about desolate moods and environments. The scattered houses stood farther and farther apart in a broken string along the seashore, the afternoon was closing with a premature and partly lurid twilight; the sea was of an inky purple and murmuring ominously. In the scrappy back garden of the MacNabs which ran down towards the sand, two black, barren-looking trees stood up like demon hands held up in astonishment, and as Mrs. MacNab ran down the street to meet them with lean hands similarly spread, and her fierce face in shadow, she was a little like a demon herself.

The doctor and the priest made scant reply to her shrill reiterations of her daughter's story, with more disturbing details of her own, to the divided vows of vengeance against Mr. Glass for murdering, and against Mr. Todhunter for being murdered, or against the latter for having dared to want to marry her daughter, and for not having lived to do it. They passed through the narrow passages in the front

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of the house until they came to the lodger's door at the back, and there Dr. Hood, with the trick of an old detective, put his shoulder sharply to the panel and burst in the door.

It opened on a scene of silent catastrophe. No one seeing it, even for a flash, could doubt that the room had been the theater of some thrilling collision between two, or perhaps more, persons. Playing cards lay littered across the table or fluttered about the floor as if a game had been interrupted. Two wine glasses stood ready for wine on a side table, but a third lay smashed in a star of crystal upon the carpet. A few feet from it lay what looked like a long knife or short sword, straight, but with an ornamental and pictured handle; its dull blade just caught a gray glint from the dreary window behind, which showed the black trees against the leaden level of the sea. Towards the opposite corner of the room was rolled a gentleman's silk top hat, as if it had just been knocked off his head; so much, indeed, that one almost looked to see it still rolling. And in the corner behind it, thrown like a sack of potatoes, but corded like a railway trunk, lay Mr. James Todhunter, with a scarf across his mouth, and six or seven ropes knotted round his elbows and ankles. His brown eyes were alive and shifted alertly.

Dr. Orion Hood paused for one instant on the door mat and drank in the whole scene of voiceless violence. Then he stepped swiftly across the carpet, picked up the tall silk hat, and gravely put it upon the head of the yet pinioned Todhunter. It was so much too large for him that it almost tipped down on to his shoulders.

"Mr. Glass's hat," said the doctor, returning with it and peering into the inside with a pocket lens. "How to explain the absence of Mr. Glass and the presence of Mr. Glass's hat? For Mr. Glass is not a careless man with his clothes. This hat is of a stylish shape and systematically brushed and burnished, though not very new. An old dandy, I should think."

"But, good heavens!" called out Miss MacNab, "aren't you going to untie the man first?"

"I say 'old' with intention, though not with certainty," continued the expositor. "My reason for it might seem a little far-fetched. The hair of human beings falls out in very varying degrees, but almost always falls out slightly, and with the lens I should see the tiny hairs in a *hat* recently worn. It has none, which leads me to guess that Mr. Glass is bald. Now when this is taken with the high-pitched and querulous voice which Miss MacNab described so vividly (patience, my dear lady, patience), when we take the hairless head together with the tone common in senile anger, I should think we may deduce some advance in years. Nevertheless, he was probably vigorous, and he was

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almost certainly tall. I might rely in some degree on the story of his previous appearance at the window, as a tall man in a silk hat, but I think I have more exact indication. This wine glass has been smashed all over the place, but one of its splinters lies on the high bracket beside the mantelpiece. No such fragment could have fallen there if the vessel had been smashed in the hand of a comparatively short man like Mr. Todhunter."

"By the way," said Father Brown, "might it not be as well to untie Mr. Todhunter?"

"Our lesson from the drinking vessels does not end here," proceeded the specialist. "I may say at once that it is possible that the man Glass was bald or nervous through dissipation rather than age. Mr. Todhunter, as has been remarked, is a quiet, thrifty gentleman, essentially an abstainer. These cards and wine cups are no part of his normal habit; they have been produced for a particular companion. But, as it happens, we may go further. Mr. Todhunter may or may not possess this wine service, but there is no appearance of his possessing any wine. What, then, were these vessels to contain? I would at once suggest some brandy or whiskey, perhaps of a luxurious sort, from a flask in the pocket of Mr. Glass. We have thus something like a picture of the man, or at least of the type: tall, elderly, fashionable, but somewhat frayed, certainly fond of play and strong waters, and perhaps rather too fond of them. Mr. Glass is a gentleman not unknown on the fringes of society."

"Look here," cried the young woman, "if you don't let me pass to untie him I'll run outside and scream for the police."

"I should not advise *you,* Miss MacNab," said Dr. Hood gravely, "to be in any hurry to fetch the police. Father Brown, I seriously ask you to compose your flock, for their sakes, not for mine. Well, we have seen something of the figure and quality of Mr. Glass; what are the chief facts known of Mr. Todhunter? They are substantially three: that he is economical, that he is more or less wealthy, and that he has a secret. Now surely it is obvious that there are the three chief marks of the kind of man who is blackmailed. And surely it is equally obvious that the faded finery, the profligate habits and the shrill irritation of Mr. Glass, are the unmistakable marks of the kind of man who blackmails him. We have the two typical figures of a tragedy of hush money: on the one hand, the respectable man with a mystery, on the other, the west-end vulture with a scent for a mystery. These two men have met here today and have quarreled, using blows and a bare weapon."

"Are you going to take these ropes off?" asked the girl stubbornly.

Dr. Hood replaced the silk hat

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carefully on the side table, and went across to the captive. He studied him intently, even moving him a little and half turning him round by the shoulders, but he only answered:

"No, I think these ropes will do very well till your friends the police bring the handcuffs."

Father Brown, who had been looking dully at the carpet, lifted his round face and said, "What do you mean?"

The man of science had picked up the peculiar dagger-sword from the carpet and was examining it intently as he answered.

"Because you find Mr. Todhunter tied up," he said, "you all jump to the conclusion that Mr. Glass had tied him up; and then, I suppose, escaped. There are four objections to this. First, why should a gentleman so dressy as our friend Glass leave his hat behind him, if he left of his own free will? Second," he continued, moving towards the window, "this is the only exit, and it is locked on the inside. Third, this blade here has a tiny touch of blood at the point, but there is no wound on Mr. Todhunter. Mr. Glass took that wound away with him, dead or alive. Add to all this primary probability. It is much more likely that the blackmailed person would try to kill his incubus, rather than that the blackmailer would try to kill the goose that lays his golden eggs. There, I think, we have a complete story."

"But the ropes?" inquired the priest, whose eyes had remained open with a rather vacant admiration.

"Ah, the ropes," said the expert with a singular intonation. "Miss MacNab very much wanted to know why I did not set Mr. Todhunter free from his ropes. Well, I will tell her. I did not do it because Mr. Todhunter can set himself free from them at any minute he chooses."

"What?" cried the audience in quite different notes of astonishment.

"I have looked at all the knots on Mr. Todhunter," reiterated Hood quietly. "I happen to know something about knots; they are quite a branch of criminal science. Every one of those knots he has made himself and could loosen himself; not one of them would have been made by an enemy really trying to pinion him. The whole of this affair of the ropes is a clever fake, to make us think him the victim of the struggle instead of the wretched Glass, whose corpse may be hidden in the garden or stuffed up the chimney."

There was a rather depressed silence; the room was darkening, the sea-blighted boughs of the garden trees looked leaner and blacker than ever, yet they seemed to have come nearer to the window. One could almost fancy they were sea monsters like crakens or cuttlefish, writhing polypi who had crawled

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up from the sea to see the end of this tragedy, even as *he,* the villain and victim of it, the terrible man in the tall hat, had once crawled up from the sea. For the whole air was dense with the morbidity of blackmail, which is the most morbid of human things, because it is a crime concealing a crime; a black plaster on a blacker wound.

The face of the little Catholic priest, which was commonly complacent and even comic, had suddenly become knotted with a curious frown. It was not the blank curiosity of his first innocence. It was rather that creative curiosity which comes when a man has the beginnings of an idea. "Say it again, please," he said in a simple, bothered manner. "Do you mean that Todhunter can tie himself up all alone and untie himself all alone?"

"That is what I mean," said the doctor.

"Jerusalem!" ejaculated Brown suddenly, "I wonder if it could possibly be that!"

He scuttled across the room rather like a rabbit, and peered with quite a new impulsiveness into the partially covered face of the captive. Then he turned his own rather fatuous face to the company. "Yes, that's it!" he cried in a certain excitement. "Can't you see it in the man's face? Why, look at his eyes!"

Both the Professor and the girl followed the direction of his glance. And though the broad black scarf completely masked the lower half of Todhunter's visage, they did grow conscious of something struggling and intense about the upper part of it.

"His eyes do look queer," cried the young woman, strongly moved. "You brutes—I believe it's hurting him!"

"Not that, I think," said Dr. Hood. "The eyes have certainly a singular expression. But I should interpret those transverse wrinkles as expressing rather such slight psychological abnormality—"

"Oh, bosh!" cied Father Brown, "can't you see he's laughing?"

"Laughing!" repeated the doctor, with a start, "but what on earth can he be laughing at?"

"Well," replied the Reverend Brown apologetically, "not to put too fine a point on it, I think he is laughing at you. And, indeed, I'm a little inclined to laugh at myself, now I know about it."

"Now you know about what?" asked Hood, in some exasperation.

"Now I know," replied the priest, "the profession of Mr. Todhunter."

He shuffled about the room looking at one object after another, with what seemed to be a vacant stare, and then invariably bursting into an equally vacant laugh, a highly irritating process for those who had to watch it. He laughed very much over the hat, still more uproariously over the broken glass, but the blood on the sword point sent him into

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mortal convulsions of amusement. Then he turned to the fuming specialist.

"Dr. Hood," he cried enthusiastically, "you are a great poet! You have called an uncreated being out of the void. How much more godlike that is than if you had only ferreted out the mere facts! Indeed, the mere facts are rather commonplace and comic by comparison."

"I have no notion what you are talking about," said Dr. Hood rather haughtily. "My facts are all inevitable, though necessarily incomplete. A place may be permitted to intuition, perhaps (or poetry if you prefer the term), but only because the corresponding details cannot as yet be ascertained. In the absence of Mr. Glass—"

"That's it, that's it," said the little priest, nodding quite eagerly. "That's the first idea to get fixed—the absence of Mr. Glass. He is so extremely absent. I suppose," he added reflectively, "that there was never anybody so absent as Mr. Glass."

"Do you mean he is absent from the town?" demanded the doctor.

"I mean he is absent from everywhere," answered Father Brown. "He is absent from the Nature of Things, so to speak."

"Do you seriously mean," said the specialist with a smile, "that there is no such person?"

The priest made a sign of assent. "It does seem a pity," he said.

Orion Hood broke into a contemptuous laugh. "Well," he said, "before we go on to the hundred and one other evidences, let us take the first proof we found—the first fact we fell over when we fell into this room. If there is no Mr. Glass, whose hat is this?"

"It is Mr. Todhunter's," replied Brown.

"But it doesn't fit him," cried Hood impatiently. "He couldn't possibly wear it!"

Father Brown shook his head with ineffable mildness. "I never said he could wear it," he answered. "I said it was his hat. Or, if you insist on a shade of difference, a hat that is his."

"And where is the shade of difference?" asked the criminologist with a slight sneer.

"My good sir," cried the mild little man, with his first movement akin to impatience, "if you will walk down the street to the nearest hatter's shop, you will see that there is, in common speech, a difference between a man's hat and the hats that are his."

"But a hatter," protested Hood, "can get money out of his stock of new hats. What could Todhunter get out of this one old hat?"

"Rabbits," replied Father Brown promptly.

"What?" cried Dr. Hood.

"Rabbits, ribbons, rolls of colored paper," said the reverend gentleman with rapidity. "Didn't you see it all when you found out the faked ropes? It's just the same with the

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sword. Mr. Todhunter hasn't got a scratch on him, as you say; but he's got a scratch *in* him, if you follow me."

"Do you mean inside Mr. Todhunter's clothes?" inquired Mrs. MacNab sternly.

"I do not mean inside Mr. Todhunter's clothes," said Father Brown. "I mean inside Mr. Todhunter."

"Mr. Todhunter," explained Father Brown placidly, "is learning to be a professional conjurer, as well as juggler, ventriloquist, and expert in the rope trick. The conjuring explains the hat. It is without traces of hair, not because it is worn by the prematurely bald Mr. Glass, but because it had never been worn by anybody. The juggling explains the three glasses, which Todhunter was teaching himself to throw up and catch in rotation. But, being only at the stage of practice, he smashed one glass against the ceiling. And the juggling also explains the sword, which it was Mr. Todhunter's professional pride and duty to swallow. But, again, being at the stage of practice, he very slightly grazed the inside of his throat with the weapon. Hence he has a wound inside him, which I am sure (from the expression of his face) is not a serious one. He was also practising the trick of a release from ropes, like the Davenport Brothers, and he was just about to free himself when we all burst into the room. The cards, of course, are for card tricks, and they are scattered on the floor because he had just been practising one of those dodges of sending them flying through the air. He merely kept his trade a secret, because he had to keep his tricks secret, like any other conjurer. But the mere fact of an idler in a top hat having once looked in at his back window, and been driven away by him with great indignation, was enough to set us all on a track of romance, and make us imagine his whole life overshadowed by the silk-hatted specter of Mr. Glass."

"But what about the two voices?" asked Maggie, staring.

"Have you never heard a ventriloquist?" asked Father Brown. "Don't you know they speak first in their natural voice, and then answer themselves in just that shrill, squeaky, unnatural voice that you heard?"

There was a long silence, and Dr. Hood regarded the little man who had spoken with a dark and attentive smile. "You are certainly a very ingenious person," he said. "It could not have been done better in a book. But there is just one part of Mr. Glass you have not succeeded in explaining away, and that is his name. Miss MacNab distinctly heard him so addressed by Mr. Todhunter."

The Rev. Mr. Brown broke into a rather childish giggle. "Well, that," he said, "that's the silliest part of the whole silly story. When

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our juggling friend here threw up the three glasses in turn, he counted them aloud as he caught them, and also commented aloud when he failed to catch them. What he really said was 'One, two and three—missed a glass; one, two—missed a glass.' And so on."

There was a second of stillness in the room, and then everyone burst out laughing. As they did so the figure in the corner complacently uncoiled all the ropes and let them fall with a flourish. Then, advancing into the middle of the room with a bow, he produced from his pocket a big bill printed in blue and red, which announced that *ZALADIN*, the World's Greatest Conjurer, Contortionist, Ventriloquist, and Human Kangaroo, would be ready with an entirely new series of Tricks at the Empire Pavilion, Scarborough, on Monday evening next at eight o'clock precisely.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **PATRICIA KNOWLTON**

TITLE: ***The Heirloom***

TYPE: Strange Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *A beautifully written story, as brilliant and full-faceted as a perfectly cut diamond . . . Oh, what worlds of meaning and drama can be told by the fine art of implication!*

PROPPED AGAINST PILLOWS UNDER the bed's curling wings, Carlotta gathered force. She was waiting for her daughter-in-law.

The vast, baroque bed crowded the apartment's one small bedroom. The bed was borrowed; a friend who had emigrated early, in the days when one could extricate more than one's mere self, had given it to Carlotta—"to remind you of home."

Carlotta half closed her eyes so as not to see beyond the rearing dolphins at the bed's foot. There was hardly passageway between the great wooden fish and the wall, mottled with the vague, ferny growth that landlords favor for utilitarian flats.

Two dolphins are not much out of which to evoke history. On the whole, Carlotta preferred not to be "reminded"; she had decided some time since that it was wise to be at peace with one's surroundings. But today there would be an effort—at the end, she told herself, one must have something to give. She had determined to gamble, to take the final risk that Marilyn, some day, would understand her motive. She would never know.

Carlotta was ready when the girl knocked and entered, crossed the room, and bent to kiss her forehead.

"Marvelous, marvelous," Carlotta said, coming perfectly to life. "The train from the suburbs runs true!

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You found the awfully good sitter after all! The children are well! Rudi's boss gives him a few minutes for home?" Her dark eyes crackled with the incandescence of people for whom conversation is a major reality. The girl, Marilyn, was dim and passive by contrast. She nodded response.

"My dear," said Carlotta, "I myself am not at all well, not at all. In horrid fact, the doctor says I may expect another attack momentarily—today, tomorrow, next week. I shall put my house in order while I can."

The girl made a small, protesting sound.

"I know, I know," Carlotta said, "These deathbed scenes are altogether out of fashion. It is dreadfully rude to admit to one's mortality. But at my age, Marilyn, one finds ways to make young doctors tell what one wants to know. One can perhaps find ways to make other young people behave as splendidly as one would like." Carlotta fairly twinkled.

Marilyn reached out and grasped the older woman's hand, and Carlotta put her other hand on top of the girl's, sandwich fashion.

"There," she said. "I wanted you to come for your inheritance. It is small enough, child, and it might be kind to spare you—I could simply send the necklace in the mail. But there was such a fine little ceremony when I got it—a little drama, and a moral—you ought to have all of that, too."

Marilyn smiled at last, and Carlotta patted her hand.

"Now," Carlotta said, "you are less embarrassed. Bring me the necklace from the dresser, and let me see you wear it."

Marilyn fetched a massive wreath of pearls and stones, then knelt so that Carlotta could fasten it at the back of her neck.

"Stand back and let me look at you. Ah, it does become you, Marilyn."

Carlotta was pleased, as the old countess had been pleased. She motioned the girl to the one straight, attentive chair next to the bed, and settled herself in the pillows.

"Imagine, if you can," she said, "a bed as grandiose as this—oh, grander by far, foaming crazily in organdy and lace and satin, standing high on a sort of stage in a room so long and mirrored that the bed looms like a ship at sea. There, fading as I am now, a woman—my husband's mother. There I am, too," Carlotta said, amused, "young, dutiful, enormously shy of death . . ." She smiled at Marilyn, whose young and dutiful white neck was bent politely under its new burden.

"The maid—she was called Marthe—set the necklace on me. The countess's maids were always Marthe, as I think of it. I suspect she herself simply named them so, whatever they may have been christened. A tremendous conven-

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ience, but hardly courteous. Perhaps they didn't mind.

"Then the countess my mother-in-law sent the girl away, down to the far end of the room where the chamberlain waited with the two doctors." Carlotta waved her hand, dismissing a maid. "My husband's father, wearing order ribbons for the occasion, or possibly for a dinner later, smoked cigars and walked up and down in the little conservatory beyond the glass doors.

"Oh, the countess was pale, wasted. She lay against the azure damask of the headboard, framed by swarms of golden Cupids. But when she saw the jewels at my throat, she leaned forward." Carlotta leaned forward.

"Then she told me, ah, so very gravely, that the women of our house have worn this necklace for centuries—to the christenings of kings and the crownings of emporers, to the great state balls and the high political weddings where history has happened. 'Wear it often, child,' she said, 'and wear it proudly. It has been proudly worn.'"

Carlotta rested, remembering back, all those seas and wars ago. She was translating as she spoke, recalling the graceful, tutored French they had all spoken then.

"Child," she went on, "men have died to bring those stones to us. The ornament at your throat is worth the ransom of a province, it holds the price of an army. Well, once it would have bought an army," Carlotta said, "a rather small, old-fashioned one.

"One wears one's jewels with a proper pride, child, but let the necklace chasten you sometimes. Let it remind you now and then that all is not visible to the beholder. True worth is measured by the spirit, true pride can be reckoned only from within the soul.

"Yes," said Carlotta, "that is what the countess said to me. It was very easy to be a moralist then, Marilyn. And an elegant one, too . . . my husband's mother, dying there in her fantastic ship of state, turned a little epigram for me. She had taken a long time, perhaps, lying there, to plan it out."

Carlotta sat up straight, polishing her translation.

"The gems have certain value, child," she said carefully, *"but when you wear them, for your soul's sake, wear them as though they were paste."*

Carlotta settled back among her pillows, letting the little garland of words stand in the air.

"Advice so neatly put," she said finally, "is memorable. Now, my child, you must run along, for I have given you my little scene and I am tired. Only do me one favor—find out if Rudi can take you dancing for an hour. The women of our house must dance sometimes."

Carlotta closed her eyes. Really,

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she thought, she was very tired. She would not be altogether sorry to go. She felt the girl's parting kiss on her forehead, then heard her close the door.

Now that it was over, she was glad she had gone through with it. All truths are partial, and disillusion is glad to wait.

Only too clearly, Carlotta remembered each of the times when she had pried out a stone—the rubies that had bribed their way across two borders, the diamonds that had kept them in Lisbon, the pale, full pearls—how many it had taken!—that had bought passage to America. Then, year by year, the tuition — a fair price, Carlotta thought wryly, for the ransom of a province or the education of a son.

Behind her closed eyes, she saw Marilyn in the necklace, wakening to a thoughtful, new sense of herself. How many thousand dishes, diapers, dinners had that young creature managed, and how many more to come? If it was dull and hard at times, Marilyn had given no sign. Still, what spirit will not welcome a lift?

Yes, Carlotta told herself again, one must have something to give. The setting, the past, were authentic; the jeweler's replacements were wearable.

Carlotta sat up in bed.

"The stones are paste," she said distinctly to the empty room. *"But for your soul's sake, child, wear them as though they were real."*

She had taken a long time, lying in her bed, to turn the phrases.

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BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

When mystery writers turn away from the field and "go straight," they often don't go far. Cornell Woolrich's HOTEL ROOM (Random, $3.50) is, as you know from the curious sample in EQMM two months ago, less a novel than a collection of episodes, many with the impact of his crime shorts (see below). STARRBELOW (Scribner's, $3.75) by "China Thompson," pseudonym of a well-known crime writer, is a costume romance of London in 1764; a striking unorthodox "trial" and a deftly surprising plot commend it to admirers of Carr's period mysteries.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ **THE DEVIL'S AGENT, by Hans Habe** (Fell, $4.50)

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☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ **THE DEAD MAN'S KNOCK, by John Dickson Carr** (Harper, $2.95)

Dr. Gideon Fell returns in Carr's best modern whodunit in a decade, complete with eery atmosphere and baffling locked room.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ **THE APRIL ROBIN MURDERS, by Craig Rice and Ed McBain** (Simon & Schuster, $3.50)

Blithe, gay, happy foolishment reviving the grand team of Bingo and Handsome, itinerant photographers and murder-solvers.

☆ ☆ ☆ **BLACK MAIL, by Doris Miles Disney** (Crime Club, $2.95)

Another meticulous, believable study of the Postal Inspection Service, this time dealing with poison-pen letters.

☆ ☆ ☆ **CASE OF THE PETTICOAT MURDER, by Jonathan Craig** (Gold Medal, 25¢)

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☆ ☆ ☆ **VIOLENCE, by Cornell Woolrich** (Dodd, Mead, $2.95)

6 stories, largely new. There are better uncollected Woolriches (especially in these pages), but the breathless magic is still there. Other recommended collections: John and Ward Hawkins' DEATH WATCH (Dodd, Mead, $2.95), 2 short suspense novels; the reprint of Rex Stout's fine 1957 threesome, 3 FOR THE CHAIR (Bantam, 35¢).

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**DASHIELL HAMMETT**
TITLE:	***Itchy the Debonair***
TYPE:	Crook Story
CRIMINAL:	Itchy
LOCALE:	San Francisco
TIME:	A generation ago
COMMENTS:	*It is said that "Art imitates Nature"—or, to put it another way, "Art imitates Life"; but isn't it true that Life often imitates Art? Here is a wry tale in point.*

DEBONAIR BANDIT ROBS OAKLAND BANK LOCKS OFFICIALS IN VAULT ESCAPES WITH $2500

Shortly after the Bay City State Bank of Oakland opened its doors for business this morning, an unmasked bandit, locking officials and employees in the vault, fled with the contents of the money drawer.

No depositors were in the bank at the time, the front door having been unlocked but a few minutes before. The robber came in quietly from the street, whipped out a revolver, and drove Milton Beecroft, president, James K. Kirkbride, cashier, and Miss Marcella Redgray, stenographer, into the vault, politely assuring them that they would not be harmed if they did as they were told. After locking the door upon them the bandit walked out of the bank with about $2500 in bills of various denominations. $300 in silver in the same drawer was not taken, and he overlooked a large amount of money in the vault at the time.

Half an hour later Beecroft released himself and his employees by removing the inside combination plate with a screwdriver kept in the vault for that purpose, and notified the police. It is believed that the bandit left in an automobile seen

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standing in the neighborhood at the time of the robbery. He is described as about 30 years old, short and muscular, and dressed in a dark, rough suit, dark cap, and khaki shirt. Police inspectors assigned to the case are of the opinion that this clothing may have been worn to lead suspicion astray, as the bandit's manner was that of a man of culture and refinement.

"WHAT THE DEVIL?" PETE DEmanded. "You must of put on the high hat for them guys! What's a debonair?"

"That's a lot of bunk!" Itchy protested with warmth. "I didn't make no cracks that that kind of stuff could be got out of. I went in and flashed the rod, and said, 'Get in there, all of you,' pointing to the box. The stenog—one of them goofy kids—has me worried for a minute. I'm afraid she's going to try to be funny, or let out a squawk, or something: she's got that kind of look in her eye. So I tell her, sharp, 'Now you run along with them, sister. I don't want to have to hurt you.' She goes, I slam the door on them, clean out the till, and duck out to you. That's all there was to it. It's these newspapers! Like making it twenty-five centuries, when eighteen hundred was all we got."

Pete's mouth widened in a grin at the earnestness of this defense, a grin which, for all its breadth, did not tighten his lips appreciably, or give them the least semblance of resilience.

"You ought to get yourself a cane, and one of these monocles. Ain't no use doing things halfway. Funny I never rapped to it before that I was throwing in with a dude!"

Itchy scowled at his partner and picked up another paper. In this one also, the robbery held a position of honor on the front page, but nothing was said here of the bandit's courtesy or suaveness. So Itchy read it to Pete, and then the third paper's version, likewise devoid of objectionable adjectives.

But Pete was not to be denied his humor.

"I guess I better shake up the scoffings," he said as he carried the packages he had brought in with the afternoon papers over to the gas stove in a corner of the room. "You oughtn't to spoil your lily-white hands with cooking. It ain't debonair."

Itchy returned his stockinged feet to the window sill, leaning back in his chair and lighting a cigarette with a pretense of indifference to the witticisms that came over his partner's shoulder between the rattling of pans. He was sorry he hadn't laughed with Pete at first. No use giving Pete a chance to ride him: Pete would make a song of it. But it was too late now.

Those damn reporters, twisting things around, trying to be funny! "Debonair," whatever that was, "politely," "culture," "refinement."

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He'd show them. Next time he'd dent somebody's skull, and let them see what they could make out of that. And as for Pete—who now referred to him as "Itchy the Debonair"—if Pete kept this up he was going to get smacked. But good!

In a car stolen that morning, Itchy and Pete caught up with the automobile they had trailed from the factory to the bank and now halfway back. They drew abreast, slackened their own pace, and edged over toward it, forcing other car against the curb. There was a moment of hesitancy upon the part of the three men in the factory car, then obedience, and a bag of money, meant until now to cover a payroll, changed cars. Nothing remained to the robbery except the escape.

Itchy, however, did not immediately give the word for Pete to drive on. He remembered his self-given promise to slug somebody next time, that his reputation might be redeemed from the calumny of gentility. He could easily swing the weapon in his left hand into the scared fat face of the nearest factory employee—maybe knock some of his teeth out.

He screwed around in his seat a little, for better leverage, and Pete's breath rasped in his ear. Pete was a partner to be trusted completely: no matter how badly frightened Pete might be he would hold up his end, wouldn't dog it in a pinch. But Pete was always scared. He was without joy in his vocation. He knew nothing of exaltation in the power of a crooked forefinger to take what it wanted from the world. Robbery was to him—exclusive of the money involved, and even that was powerless to stimulate him during the actual operation—no more pleasant than to his prey. And to Pete this lingering when the work was done was agony.

Itchy, in the pride of his own imperturbable subnormality, found inspiration in the hoarse panting beside him. Pete had ridden him ragged for a solid week about that Oakland job, had he? Had called him a dude, had he? And "Itchy the Debonair"? He'd give Pete a bellyful this time!

"I regret exceedingly," Itchy told the factory employees, "the necessity of having to do this"—hazy remembrance of a letter he had once received from a bill collecting agency carried him that far—"and I hope—I trust you boys won't do nothing you'll be sorry for."

Pete had enough. He bent over the wheel and they shot up Mission Street, Itchy leaning out to call back: "I bid you good day!"

How did Pete like that?

But Pete didn't say whether he liked it or not. He said nothing about it, even when they were safely home again. Toward evening he went out for groceries, and did not come back. He had his share of

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the loot. He and Itchy had been together for nearly a year now: seven or eight months on the road, and the last few "jungling up" in this housekeeping room on Ellis Street. He liked Itchy, and in association with Itchy he had prospered as never before. But he had had some experience with men who became swollen with success, and he did not intend being involved in the ensuing wreckage this time.

Itchy waited an hour, and then he went down to the corner for food and the papers. He understood now why Pete hadn't raised a row over the holdup. Well, if Pete didn't like his style, all right. He could find another partner, or perhaps he'd be better off working alone. He had done all the real work anyway—the actual going up against the gun—though Pete had been handy with a car.

Itchy read the afternoon papers before he cooked his meal. They were unanimous now: the bandit, they all agreed, was the same one who had robbed the Oakland bank, and he was a gentleman crook, a brother to those suave dandies of fiction who so easily confound the best policing brains of the several continents.

Fiction, Itchy knew, meant stories, books. He had never thought of stories having any connection with actuality, any relation with life; but it seemed that they did, and not only with life but with him. Books had been written about men like him; that was what the newspapers were getting at.

There is a stratum of criminal society whose constituents—either bandits or safe burglars; the latter, once predominant, now a dwindling minority, are primarily hoboes. They have all the caste consciousness of those wanderers, all their contempt for the niceties of gentler modes of life. You will find them in the cities often, but they bring with them all their pride in their hardness, in their independence, in their ability to do for themselves whatever needs to be done.

The tawdry resort of the town criminal seldom sees them; they affect a fine disesteem for women, and their contacts with them are infrequent and brief. Their ideal abode in a city is a flat in some shoddy district, or, if that is not practicable, a room with a stove, where they may live free of traffic with cooks and other devices of civilization. In short, they are outcasts, and that is their pride. And they like to treat a city as if it were not a city at all, but merely another sort of countryside.

Itchy—idling now most of the days in his room, rereading his three clippings and mulling over the phrase, "gentlemen crooks of fiction"—was of this tribe. And his place among them, he boasted, was second to none. He was as tough as any, as independent of the comforts of less tardy existences, as

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able to take care of himself.

But it wasn't as if he had been born to that life. If you came right down to it, his people were as good as the best: if the old man was still alive he would have been by now a letter carrier for nearly twenty-five years. No, his people were not riff-raff by any means. And Itchy had been given a good education before he slipped away on his own account: he had gone through the seventh grade of grammar school.

So if he was a hobo it was from choice, not because—like Pete, for instance—he wasn't fit for anything else. He could do other things if he wanted to. And maybe he would want to. There might be something in this "gentleman crook" stuff. People had written books about them . . .

In a downtown bookstore a saleswoman told Itchy that she did have gentleman crook stories, and she sold him five of them.

At the outset he found them disappointing, meaningless. They hadn't anything to do with life after all. Four of them he put aside with their initial chapters only partly read, but on the fifth he got the swing of the thing, read it through, went back to the others, read them, and returned to the bookstore for more.

The books weren't, on the whole, satisfactory. In the first place, most of them had to do with house burglars. And, although these fellows were undoubtedly a very superior breed, with their elegant clothes and manners, their brilliant repartee, and their dazzling audacity, Itchy couldn't spare them a large measure of the contempt he felt for all followers of that trade. Then, in many of the stories, the crook was revealed, toward the end, as a detective going deviously, foolishly, and with much trouble to himself, about his hunt for the missing jewels. And, if really a crook, he was more than likely to reform in the last few chapters; but as he usually bettered his financial condition by "going queer," he wasn't to be blamed so much.

The girls with whom these fellows sooner or later became involved, Itchy found to his liking; and their very difference from anything he had ever known made them more plausible to him. The women with whom he had come in contact from time to time certainly hadn't been very wonderful, even discounting his tribal pose of misogyny. But these were different. But these were different. More like—well, the girl in the bookstore was something on their order . . .

Still, say what you would about these men in the books—always being surprised at work, neglecting the most simple precautions, showing themselves unnecessarily gullible and only succeeding through the miraculous favors of chance—they did have something. They made big hauls, they were admired,

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they enjoyed themselves, and people wrote stories about them . . . Take, for example, that one who told the detective: "I'm tired of you. You bore me. You weary me. You exasperate me. Now get out." That wasn't a bad line at all. Imagine the look on an elbow's face if you told him that! Naturally, though, you'd want to be sure you were sitting pretty, before you made a crack like that.

Of course, you couldn't go around pulling jobs as these fellows did; they were no good in a practical way. But a man who knew his business through and through might, by copying their manners, their dress, and their talk, not only increase his profits by being able to get into places from which less polish would bar him, but also have a lot of fun. The newspapers liked that kind of stuff, too. Look what a fuss they raised over those two jobs of his, and he hadn't even tried to make them fancy.

Another visit to the bookstore exhausted its stock of gentleman crook fiction, but he learned that what he wanted could be found in the movies now and then, and in the magazines often.

He was in earnest now. His hair was carefully parted and weighted down with a thick gummy substance that he bought in large jars; he spent time in the barber chair, and even submitted his hands to a manicure. Nor had he neglected tailor, haberdasher, hatter, and shoe store.

He read aloud to himself in his room at night, and felt that his language was being improved thereby. Every day or two he visited the bookstore, ostensibly to inquire for new books, but actually for the sake of the saleswoman's conversation. The books could give him the right words and the right way of hooking them up together, but they couldn't give him the pronunciations. The saleswoman could, however, and not only the pronunciation but the correct accent. She formed her words high up in the roof of her mouth, and they came out roundly and clearly in what he knew instinctively was the correct form. After he had returned to his room he would repeat everything she had said, painstakingly aping each trick of enunciation.

He was going to stick up that store some day, he decided. There wouldn't be much money in the damper (he must remember to say cash register if he spoke of it) and, in the center of the shopping district, the store was not favorably located for a quick getaway. But the girl there was the only person he knew whom he thought capable of unerringly judging the false from the true, and by her attitude he would know the degree of his success. But he wouldn't do it for a while: he wasn't ready yet for so severe a test, and, besides, she would be getting new books in

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from time to time, and there was no use closing that source of supply.

Another month passed before Itchy ordered evening clothes. But all the books had insisted upon them—dinner jackets were indicated also—so he finally came to it. He didn't, however, order a dinner jacket. He felt that since he was taking this step forward he might as well make it a decisive one, and waste nothing on the compromise between formality and informality which the dinner jacket offered him. The name had puzzled him for a while. But with the help of a fortunate illustration in one of the books, he had learned that a dinner jacket was simply the coat of a Tuxedo, purchased by itself, so that the trousers of the more formal garb might do double duty, a petty economy he would have scorned.

He wore the new evening clothes every night from the first, which necessitated his remaining indoors for a while, until he became accustomed to them. But he usually kept to his room in the evenings, anyway. He had no desire for the companionship of his former familiars. He knew how they would greet this new Itchy, with his silk shirts and hose, his carefully tended face and hands, his glossy hair, his natty clothes. For those who dressed as he did—the gaudy city breed—he had lost none of his old contempt.

He became, at about this time, unpleasantly aware of his nickname. He had grown accustomed to it, had come to think of it as more natural a part of him than the baptismal Floyd; but now, thinking of it in terms of his development, he found it distasteful. He had acquired it five or six years before, sitting around a fire one night with a group of his fellows in the jungle outside of Fresno. He had been digging savagely at the flea bites with which he was covered at the time, and some old stiff across the flame had flung the name at him. He had laughed with the others; the name had stuck.

But what difference did it make? One name was as good as another. It had become a part of him. Now, however, one name was not as good as another. And while the chances were that he would never mingle again with those who knew him by it, still it might crop up at the most unexpected times to embarrass him. If he found new associates—as he undoubtedly would before long—he meant to see to it that they knew him as "Debonair"—that was a lot better than "Itchy"—had a fine sound, in fact.

Another fortnight and Itchy was wearing his correct evening clothes on the streets and into the lobbies of the better hotels, where he would loiter for an hour or two, gazing condescendingly on those whose more common garbs did day and night duty. And as his familiarity with them increased, the new

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clothes began to tempt him to wear them on a robbery. But he resisted that, for a while.

Within the next two months he held up a small jewelry store and the office of a laundry company. He was sure of himself in his new guise now, and he enlivened both with copious quotations from the books he had read, and even extemporized a trifle. In the laundry office he was fortunate enough to encounter two girls who were addicted to the same sort of literature, and their appreciation of his manner was gratifying. And even more gratifying was the warmth with which the press accepted the girls' stories, polishing them, gilding them, and setting them out at great length for the world to see. Itchy had column after column of type devoted to him now—even editorials.

The lobby of a theater just before the box office closed one night was the scene of the evening clothes' baptism. The high hat, of course, he had finally left at home; there was no use overdoing it.

His light overcoat drooping to each side, exposing the full chiaroscuro of his immaculate grooming, he smiled at the girl behind the grille and wrought beautifully with what he knew of the graces of speech. And the girl, once she had become relatively accustomed to the sight of the pistol in his hand, enjoyed the robbery perhaps as much as he.

Nevertheless she gave the alarm as soon as he left.

It happened there were only two other men in evening clothes on the streets that night, and one of them was very tall and the other was very old. And thus, though the police went astray once at the corner of Powell and Geary and again, momentarily, at Mason and Sutter, they still arrived at Itchy's quarters —he had an apartment now, on California Street—only a few minutes behind him.

There was a broken door, a bullet went wild, a blow or two, and Itchy was taken.

In a barely furnished room in the Hall of Justice, Itchy sat ringed by detectives.

"So, my pretty boy," one of them grinned his derisive triumph down at the slightly rumpled black and white of the prisoner's clothes, "we got you."

Itchy's glance ran coolly along the circling line of faces until it rested on the speaker; and there was utter nonchalance in the crossing of Itchy's legs.

"I'm tired of you," he said. "You weary me. You bore me. You exasperate me. You are a big slob!"

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **RUTH CHESSMAN**

TITLE: ***Murder—Early American***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Richard Graves, Colonial Gentleman

LOCALE: Massachusetts Bay Colony

TIME: Just before the year 1700

COMMENTS: *Elizabeth, bonds-woman to selfish old Mrs. Parsons, had a dream of grandeur—a dream that meant murder, but no bargain with the hangman . . . A distinguished story.*

OF ELIZABETH'S LIFE, FOURTEEN years had been spent in England and the last six in Massachusetts Bay Colony, where she was bonds-woman to the ugly Mrs. Parsons. The entire twenty years were as nothing, however, up to the bleak December day of the murder. She would begin to count her life only from that moment, a time barely two weeks before the year 1700.

The day itself began for her when she returned in fading twilight from the post-master in the village. She scurried into the house before the lash of a windy snow that had just started. The stableman could have gone for the mail on horseback, but Mrs. Parsons would have raised scanty orange eyebrows at the idea of sparing Elizabeth. A bonded servant-woman was there to be used. Had the girl not cost her good money in pounds sterling? Indeed, Elizabeth herself could not protest a walk of four miles in such weather. Her mean boots were thick, if shapeless; and covered as she was by an ancient wool cloak of her mistress's, she had felt the chill only in her slim fingers and straight little nose. Indignities far worse than a cold walk over frozen ground had been her lot during her servitude. In any event, she now foresaw such a quick end to her troubles that she would have done double the distance without complaint, and danced the whole way.

She came back none the worse

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for her walk than with an appetite greater than she had any hope of satisfying. Since she could not expect food until her mistress was hungry, Elizabeth hastened dutifully to the upper sitting room to give Mrs. Parsons the letter she had brought with her.

"From my nephew, is it?" the old woman asked eagerly.

"It is in his hand," said Elizabeth, making a show of scanning the rude scrawl as if for the first time.

"If virtue were measured by learning, my nephew Charles would would be a scamp indeed," Mrs. Parsons said indulgently. She began to open the letter, ruminating meanwhile, "But he's a kind, brave man, is Charles. He's no great genius, to be sure, but not a booby either."

"Oh, to be sure!" Elizabeth exclaimed on cue. "And so fine-looking besides!"

Mrs. Parsons turned quizzical green eyes on her. "And how would you know?"

"Have you forgotten Philadelphia, Ma'am?" Elizabeth asked.

"Philadelphia! Four years gone! And you caught but a look at him then," Mrs. Parsons said, dismissing a glimpse whose significance might have saved her life had she understood it.

The sight of Charles Braceridge had been for Elizabeth a peep into a future which for the first time held hope. She had meant from that moment to be Mrs. Charles Braceridge, and to step into the old woman's shoes. She often held her pretty head the higher for that dream. It would be she, Elizabeth, to whom the whaling captains came to make their reports. It would be she the agents consulted all the way from the Boston wharves. Ah, to-morrow tasted sweet to her!

And now perhaps to-morrow had come at last! She waited almost breathlessly to hear what her proposed husband had to write of his plans. On him depended his aunt's life—or rather, her death.

"He left New York on the packet as long ago as two weeks," Mrs. Parsons burst out.

Elizabeth began a hasty calculation.

"Bless me!" Mrs. Parsons went on, reading with difficulty. "It does seem as if the man means to come to-night! He writes so poor it is hard to make it out, but it does seem—"

She handed the letter to Elizabeth, saying complacently, "I'm glad I had you taught to read. Now you can read it for me and you never would have been able to, you know," she concluded with her customary affection for the obvious, and her tendency to be repetitious, "had I not had you taught."

Elizabeth automatically gave the thanks that Mrs. Parsons waited for even as she skimmed rapidly through the atrociously written letter. "He must have been in Boston these three days at least," she said.

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"He spends his time choosing a horse and waiting for full moonlight to make the ride. Make sure, Ma'am, you shall see him to-night."

"I quite dote on Charles," Mrs. Parsons said fondly. "He's a comfortable fellow, not one of your great minds to rattle a woman. I mean to have him stay long, this time. He will try to please me. He always does." She looked out at the snow. "But the storm may hold him back."

"It would not have been snowing when he set out," Elizabeth remarked. "We shall have our answer if the snow stops soon," she added, more to herself than to her mistress. Although it was a fateful thing she said, there was nothing ominous in her tones, for if a lifetime beginning in miserable poverty and reaching until now no higher than bonded servitude had taught her nothing else, it had allowed her unbounded practice in dissimulation. She could, and did, sound only commonly interested.

She busied herself now with preparations for the evening meal. Mrs. Parsons was always served in this little sitting-room on the second floor, for she was too fat and too indolent to bother going below. Here she was kept warm with a great fire heaped high with pine logs. Now that it was night the room shone bright with the clear light from whale-tallow candles.

The house within was served by three women. Each had her duties, and Elizabeth's were to do everything which the others did not. Of the three, she was the only indentured servant. She would not be free for some months yet. The cook and the maid were freedwomen, working for wages, but Elizabeth had long since given over envying them, since she did not mean to be always a servant, paid or otherwise. Meanwhile she was the candle-maker and did the boots and laid all the fires and cleaned all the silver. She had a turn for fine needlework, and did all Mrs. Parsons sewing so that her mistress, with the luck which so often attends those least in need of it, was exquisitely dressed on a pittance.

Elizabeth heaped more logs on the fire, and set the table for one. Although she ate all her meals here too, she did not go to table. It was her mistress's whim to feed her as one does a pet dog, tossing scraps and bits of food as the notion took her. The woman below envied Elizabeth for her share of all the dainties that were sent up to that little sitting-room. They could not know how it galled her to be fed as if she were less than human, nor by how much she would have preferred the rough kitchen fare. Now she caught a biscuit that Mrs. Parsons tossed her, and as always it turned to straw before she took her first bite. To-night, though, she could remind herself that the time for such humiliations grew short. He will undoubtedly come to-night,

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she promised herself, and kept stealing looks out of the window. She was made happy—long before the last morsel of food flew her way the snow had ended and the moon rode high.

"This will be the night, mark me," Mrs. Parsons said prophetically.

She indicated that she had finished her meal, so Elizabeth had no choice but to be finished too, and set about clearing the table.

Mrs. Parsons lay before Elizabeth a plan replete with all her customary selfishness. "You will stay awake to welcome my nephew," she announced. "Be it dawn, he must find at least one soul stirring when he comes."

"It would be most inhospitable otherwise," Elizabeth agreed. Indeed, it was quite part of her own plans that she be the one to greet Charles Braceridge when he arrived. After a proper period spent in marvelling at Mrs. Parson's ceaseless care for the comfort of others, Elizabeth found an opening to ask, "May I suggest, Ma'am—"

Mrs. Parsons bridled. "*You* suggest? You, Elizabeth?"

"Only this, Ma'am," Elizabeth said hastily. "Might it not be wise for me to lie down upon my bed for a short while, and thus be better able to stay awake no matter how long?"

Mrs. Parsons considered this. She twisted it about and squeezed it into a different shape until at length it came from her lips as a suggestion of her very own: "I will have you rest, so that you may be fit for a wakeful night." She considered further, and added bountifully, "Go to your rest, then—fancy, Elizabeth, I permit you to do nothing until it is time for you to bring me my wine and water."

Elizabeth, who had been desperate for this little time to herself, gave a very sincere *thank you, Ma'am* to her mistress, and ran lightly up the steps to her attic. Here she stayed only long enough to take up, with a quick, loving motion, a silken gown which hung concealed beneath Elizabeth's only other work dress, a grey cotton rag of a dress. Now she made her way down on cautious tip-toe, past the door of the sitting-room, and once safely past, all the way down to the kitchen.

"I am to wake all night," she announced to Anne, the maid, and Jane, the cook. "The nephew comes, and I am to wait up for him, so she says I may rest. If I choose to finish my gown as I rest, I am sure there is no harm in it." She moved close to the single candle. "It is only until time for her wine and water."

"Then it's little enough rest you'll have," Jane said, looking at the candle. "She'll be calling for her drink before this is burned half way. Better than a sand-glass to tell time by is that one with her eating and her drinking."

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Anne said innocently, "I often think, what is the great difference in our persons, bar age and size, of course. Here she cannot sleep but she has her night-time drink of wine, just so, mixed with water, just so—but I lay me down with naught to lull me, and sleep sound. And she must have servants to wait on her, and I do very well for myself. And all that. I do study it often, and I can see no sense in it."

"It need make no sense!" Jane said sharply. "It is so, and must be so!"

Elizabeth worked silently on the handsome gown. She had hurried with her sewing since there had been a first hint of Charles's coming, but her free times were so few that here it was, the very eve of his arrival, and she with the hem only half done. Now, however, she stitched to such good purpose that in very good time she was able to declare, with a satisfaction the others could not guess at, "Done!"

"Done," said Jane, "and all ready to hang its life away in an attic."

"Oh, but it is so beautiful!" Anne exclaimed kindly. "I am sure if you searched the whole world you could find no color better suited to Elizabeth's dark hair and dark eyes than that sweet lavender."

"And the mistress that strict I don't dare think what will happen when she learns what you have done," Jane warned. "Forever telling of being nobility herself, and must be waited on hand and foot like a queen! You mark me, Elizabeth! You will suffer for it when you are found out. There was an innkeeper's wife put in the stocks for dressing too fine—last summer 'twas. I would not put it past the mistress, if she finds out."

"I have hopes she will not find out," Elizabeth said calmly. She went into the dining-room for the goblet and the wine, and mixed her mistress's evening potion. With the goblet in one hand, and the gown draped over her other arm, she walked up the stairs again. One stop only she made, to set the wine and water noiselessly on a table by the sitting-room door. Then, passing the dangerous door, still on delicate tip-toe, she went up the stairs to the attic slowly, softly.

At the top of the stairs she counted herself safe—almost safe! The door below was flung open, and Mrs. Parsons called crossly, "Elizabeth! Eliz—oh, there you are, and about time! Here I've been sitting—what have you there, Elizabeth? What is that you carry, I say?"

For a moment Elizabeth felt as one turned to ice. She was so torn, on one side pulled towards dashing headlong to the safety of her attic, and on the other forced by habit into obedience to the mistress she had never denied, that she could do no more than stand rigid until the blood began to move in her veins again.

"Oh—Ma'am," Elizabeth said as

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soon as she could bring the words out; after only a breath's more hesitation she turned and went back down to the sitting-room. This was not the way she'd planned it, but as she walked she asked herself, what matter so slight a change? She had hoped to see Anne and Jane safely abed before killing their mistress. Now she might have to hasten the moment. If the old woman made any outcry over the gown she must do the deed at once. Why not? Neither Anne nor Jane came here at night. If it must be done now, it could be done safely.

The old woman's eyes were fixed on the gown. "You are to tell me at once what you have there?" she commanded.

"A gown, Ma'am, that I was able to fashion—all because of your kindness to me."

Mrs. Parsons's full share of this kindness could be summed up in the act of her giving Elizabeth a ripped and aging cast-off of watered-silk.

"Bring it closer, you vain, giddy girl!" Mrs. Parsons said jealously. "Have you spoiled that fine silk?"

Elizabeth obediently approached into the bright circle of candlelight.

"Well, to be sure!" Mrs. Parsons exclaimed in unwilling admiration as she examined the fine work. She lingered over it grudgingly, as if she sought a special something. Elizabeth, who knew her mistress as well as she knew the coarse black stuff of the gown she herself wore at this moment, gave her what she sought: "It is your doing, Ma'am. It is all your doing. You taught me my needlework so patiently."

It was happily ventured. Mrs. Parsons accepted it uncritically. "Many's the weary hour I spent over you," she recalled contentedly, although she herself could sew nothing more complicated than a simple cross-stitch, and that none too well.

Mrs. Parsons did not give up the gown, but held it jealously. Elizabeth could see that the old woman knew full well that with her great bulk she would not fit more than half herself into it, yet she would not give it up.

"Well, it is a very pretty bit of work," she granted finally, "although to be sure I don't know when you'll wear it. I would not have you dress too fine. You are no Mistress Eliza, you know. You must never forget your place."

"La, Ma'am!" Elizabeth protested. It amused her to invent reasons for having fashioned the gown as she waited for Mrs. Parsons to surrender it. Until it was safe in her hands once more, Elizabeth would not know if she must do her work now, or could wait until later, as she had originally planned. "La, Ma'am, I did not dream of wearing it!"

"Did you not, then?" Mrs. Parsons asked, with a face full of curiosity.

"It was only to show you how

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valuable I may yet be to you as a seamstress. My time will be up in six months, Ma'am. I cannot forget that."

"No, I dare say," Mrs. Parsons granted. "I don't know another bonds-woman ever to be treated so well. Never been lashed! Eating the very same foods as your mistress!"

Again she fingered and pulled at the dainty fabric. "But did you think I was going to turn you off with two shillings and a pair of stout boots? You may stay, Elizabeth. You are a willing, industrious girl, and you may stay. But you must not think to be above yourself. You must not think of wearing silks and being as fine as your mistress. No, Elizabeth, though you have been treated kinder than many an own daughter, I will not have you think to be above yourself!"

"Oh, Ma'am!" Elizabeth protested humbly.

"Well, then. Since you remember your place. You may stay on, and receive the same superior treatment, and continue to eat from my table! There, girl, what say you to that?"

"Thank you, Ma'am," Elizabeth replied.

She did not like the way Mrs. Parsons clung to the gown. The old woman plotted something—ah, here it came at last! "So you have turned out this handsome gown for me," she remarked carelessly. "Nicely made, of the finest silk. Unfortunately I cannot wear it myself, Elizabeth. The color—so flattering to me—I received many compliments, you will recall, when I wore the dress before you cut it up and remade it—still, the color is too lively now for my quiet way of life. But you must go and fetch Anne—Anne will know, her sister is cook at the Sedgwicks, and I am sure she will know if Hitty Sedgwick is come back from New York. I have long wished her to meet Charles, and were they to meet while she wears this gown—! Fetch Anne, do. I must know if Hitty is home."

Here was the end for Mrs. Parsons! Hitty Sedgwick indeed!

"Certainly, Ma'am," Elizabeth said politely. As if it were a matter of course she took the gown from her mistress and draped it on a sofa, safely across the room so it would not be blood-spattered. Then she walked to the fireplace, taking up the poker as if to stir the fire. Mrs. Parsons busied herself with some of her useless needlework. Elizabeth calmly raised the poker high over her head and brought it down with such force as to strike Mrs. Parsons dead with the single blow. She had determined to kill the old woman on the eve of her nephew's arrival so that Charles would be in charge when the murder was discovered. He was a dull, persuadable man, and very like him was Mr. Curtis, the Magistrate. She intended to let poor Charles and Mr. Curtis bungle it between them. And now it was done.

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She looked herself over carefully. None of the considerable spurt of blood had come near touching her. She replaced the poker, picked up her lovely silk, and went with it up to her attic. Here she sat quietly, listening to the sounds of Anne and Jane as they went to the room next to hers which they shared. It took only a short time before Jane's hearty snores reached her; she knew that Anne too would be sound asleep — as the younger woman had said, she needed no wine to lull her to sleep.

Now Elizabeth dressed in her handsome gown and quietly went down to the kitchen. Here the first candle still burned, although it was very low. Cautiously, so as to protect her gown from ashes, she added logs and stirred the old fire. Only when it was burning well did she pause to take a light from it, and by the glow of the single candle, added to the flickering light of the fire, she looked down at herself. Her gown came quite to the floor, and so hid her boots. What a joy not to be able to see them! If she were to hang to-morrow for to-day's crime, she told herself, it would still be worth it for this taste of dressing fine in a well-fitting gown of silk, and for the knowledge that never again need she be fed like a dog with scraps from the mistress's table. However, she did not mean to make any such bargain with the hangman. She did not mean to die when all of life lay before her!

In the drawing-room she built up a brisk fire. With the kitchen candle she went about the great room to light the bayberry candles, snuffing and re-lighting them over and over until the room smelled sweet with their fragrance.

She walked gracefully about the drawing-room, trying the different chairs as the mood took her, arranging the sweeping skirt of her gown carefully each time she sat down so as to hide her boots. It did seem to her she had lived a lifetime only for this moment. She had dreamed of how Charles Braceridge would look at her when he saw her thus, dressed not as the low servant she was, but in her handsome watered-silk, looking every bit the lady. The mornings she rose before the household to work on her sewing, the nights she held the needle when her eyes would shut of themselves with the weariness of the day's labor—it was all nothing now.

She knew Charles well, for it is possible for some women to know the character of some men with a single glance, and she was one such woman, and Charles one such a man. He would see her richly dressed, and he would love her. She was so sure of it that she had killed his aunt to clear the way for him to see her thus, knowing full well that while Mrs. Parsons lived there would be no handsome gown for Elizabeth.

The moon was beginning to dip when she heard the muffled sound

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of horses' hooves over the snow.

"A light!" a crisp voice carried over the sounds of the horses. "You're waited for even at this hour, you lucky devil!"

She had not expected Charles to have another with him, but yet it did not entirely surprise her. She knew at once that this must be Charles's great friend, Richard Graves. This Richard was, like Charles, Somebody's nephew. Richard had been sent from England in the customary disgrace over a married lady, and it was talked of that here he must wait on Somebody's death. The Colonies held many such, who spared the family embarrassment by being out of sight. Still, Richard or no Richard, she would yet have her Charles. She would handle Richard however appeared necessary.

It was a few minutes before the men came in, for there were the horses to be stabled. Finally, though, she could hear their boots breaking the crust of the snow, and she opened the door and stood in the chill wind until they came in, stamping and laughing. It was Charles as she remembered him, fair and handsome—yes, she must give him that, he was truly handsome. With him was Richard, a kind of agile-looking man, handsome too in his way, which was a dark one.

They took her to be a lady and greeted her with a sweeping bow, but in spite of the temptation to pretend, she knew the danger. It was not her part to play yet. She said swiftly, "Sirs, you are most kind. I am only Elizabeth, your aunt's bonds-woman, Mr. Charles."

"A bonds-woman, are you?" asked Richard. "A fine breed they're kidnapping nowadays, then."

Charles simply stared, his slow wits leaving him far behind the other.

"I have been a white slave close on seven years, sir," Elizabeth said.

Richard nodded with a knowing smile. "Of royal lineage, no doubt, and stolen from your coach while the groom flirted with your governess," he suggested.

"Oh, sir, you jest," Elizabeth answered, laughing. "I was the eldest child of twelve, and never a meal large enough to fill me until I stepped aboard the ship that carried me here. My father beat me and my mother, poor woman, hid all her sorrows in a cup."

"Well!" Richard was clearly nonplussed at her frankness.

Charles came to life. "Enough, Richard!" he said. "Here is this girl kindly waiting for us, and the hour so dim, and you must tease her with royalty and flirtings." He turned reproachful green eyes on Richard. "It is enough for me that she is here with a *royal* fire of her tending—" He gave her a token bow, looking quite pleased with himself for this daring play on words, and she responded with quite a modest curtsey.

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"I am to offer you a hot soup, and have kept the kettle on the fire against your coming," she said sedately. Both men declared something hot was just what they wanted. "After you have supped, sirs, Mrs. Parsons will receive you."

It was what she had determined must be the next step, and indeed it was quite in the character of the woman, who was inquisitive as a cat.

"Mrs. Parsons—? Mrs. Parsons will receive us?" Richard exclaimed.

"Certainly, sir," Elizabeth said, but her surprise seemed no greater than Richard's, who went on, "I had it that she did not receive your letter, Charles, and went off on a visit. I could see it no other way than that she must be away from here."

"Could you not?" Charles asked interestedly.

"Your pardon, sir, but Mrs. Parsons had her nephew's letter this day," Elizabeth said, astonished. "I myself read it over to her. She waits only for him to be refreshed after his long ride that she may greet him."

Richard stared at her thoughtfully for a moment, then turned to Charles. "You misled me, you dog!"

"I? Misled you?" Charles repeated.

"It was all innocently done, I am sure," Richard said, and laughed indulgently. "You did not set out to draw a false picture for me."

"Of that you may be sure," Charles declared, brightening. "I am glad you see that I meant nothing by it, because although I do not quite take your meaning, I meant no harm."

"Of that I have no doubt," Richard said, laughing still more.

For once Elizabeth was no wiser than Charles. She could not make sense of Richard's talk, and like Charles was glad to hear an end of it. As she went to fetch the soup she lingered a moment outside the door. Richard said lightly, "Too bad one of yon girl's sisters is not in slavery with her. It would make a far better balance, one for each of us."

It took a little time for poor Charles to phrase his thought: "She is a beauty, is she not?"

"And with an eye for you, my lad," said Richard. "You've noticed it, I trust? An eye for the young master has this girl."

"I did think—it did seem—" Charles sputtered to a stop like a wheel with its treadle broken, then began once more, "Girls never look at me in the ordinary way when you are about, Richard," he said ingenuously. "I've marked it, you know. You have a flash, or a spark, or something, and when you are about, they never notice me. So! You think she liked me, then! I thought so myself, I confess. I did observe it myself."

He had his aunt's manner of

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stupid repetition, but in this case Elizabeth gave him leave to repeat as much as he liked. What she had foretold had come to pass. Charles, too dull to attract a woman he could like, would like any woman he could attract. He was already flattered by her preference, and with his noble intelligence gratitude must be akin to love.

When she re-entered with the soup, Richard was talking once more. "But was I right, Charles—you told me your aunt was born in the old country?"

"Indeed she was, on the old Lord's estate," Charles answered. "But she being a grand-daughter so many times removed from the title she was easily persuaded to give up the 'Lady' when my uncle offered for her. He was strong against titles, you know. He would have none of it; he made her promise to return with him to the Colonies. And so she did, and when he died she went on in his way, and none the worse for it, if you ask me."

"But she has strong leanings for dear old England," Richard pressed on.

"It would only be expected," Charles exclaimed defensively. "Born on the old Lord's estate, you know! She could not bring herself to go back, the ocean voyage being what it is, but she often says England is the only place for the gentry. There the class is properly looked up to! She is often put about that I care so little. I am American born, you know. I do not care for the English business as my dear aunt does."

"There is something very strange here," Richard muttered.

"Is there, indeed?" Charles asked with his unfailing good-humour. He smiled at Elizabeth and took a bowl from her hands. "This hot American soup is more to my taste than your English Lords, Richard."

When Elizabeth saw the men fed and satisfied and yawning for bed, she reminded them it was time to pay their respects to Mrs. Parsons.

"And you will guide us to her?" Richard asked curiously.

"Yes, sir," Elizabeth answered. His oddness would have confused her another time, but now the closeness to the crucial moment of discovery brushed all else aside. "My mistress would be most put about not to see you this night."

Charles laughed affectionately. "You never saw the match of my aunt!" he said.

"Never saw her match in taste, at any rate," Richard answered with a sly look at Elizabeth, who carefully did not observe it. She saw what he was about—he was set to flirt. It was a temptation! Richard was by far the more attractive man, the livelier, and without challenge the wittier. But he was not for marriage, she could see that, and Charles was. She had known all about Charles from that one quick look four years ago, and he proved her right and right again

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each word he spoke. No, likes and not-likes did not matter here. She had set her cap for Charles, and Charles she would have, and the match would be made palatable by all that came with him.

The candles in the little sitting-room had burned out, but the fire still gave a light, and Richard's sharp eyes caught sight of the body on the floor at once.

"Here, what's that!" he exclaimed, and dropped to one knee. He gave a quick look at the cruelly beaten head. "Murdered!" he said in an undertone, as if the word carried a special answer to him.

"Dead?" Charles asked. "You mean my aunt is dead?"

"Done to death," Richard said, and added callously, "Someone's done you a good turn, man. Someone's made you a rich man with one stroke of—" he looked about him, then strode to the fireplace and took up the poker "—with one stroke of this."

Charles stared. Elizabeth was mute, since she had long ago decided not to scream at the discovery, but only to gasp and take a timid step backwards. Having acquitted herself in her role, she waited another moment, then said softly, "Oh, poor Mr. Charles! You are shocked!"

"Exactly so!" Charles said. "I am shocked! I did not expect it. I had no idea she would be dead." His voice became indignant. "You are a dog, Richard. *Someone's done me a good turn, indeed!* I was fond of my old aunt."

"I'm sure you were, man," Richard replied. "But you'll be fonder of her still, won't you, now that she's set you up in life the way you deserve." He knelt again and looked close to her. "An old woman, too—her life lived. What's she lost? If my uncle were of a like age, I could in Christian charity wish him a speedy meeting with your poor aunt." He added with mischievous impiety, "Oh, Heaven forgive me my thoughts!"

There was a little silence during which Elizabeth stood with her eyes soberly downcast, and Richard paced about the room relentlessly.

"The Magistrate must be told, sir," Elizabeth ventured, for it was an important part of her plan to place blundering Mr. Curtis promptly in charge.

"Yes, the Magistrate," Charles agreed. "And Richard, I prey you, let us have no more talk of good turns, if you please."

"Hold!" said Richard, who scarcely seemed to be listening. "Perhaps we may lay hands on the culprit ourselves, and turn a murderer over to the Magistrate with no waste of time. We don't want a long business between murder and inheritance. There are things your money will buy that we don't want to wait for."

Oh, yes, all will wait until his bride says the word, my fine Richard! Elizabeth grew angry and

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even a little fearful at this audacious man who carried everything before him, who was impatient to snatch at a fortune she had long considered her own.

"I remarked before, and I say again, it is most strange," Richard said.

"Did you?" Charles asked. "Oh, yes, indeed you did. And you see you were right, Richard. Here my poor aunt lies dead, and I do not half like it! Very strange!"

Elizabeth could not but feel that the strangest thing of all was Richard's way of talking, and felt with some relief that he might be a good partner for Magistrate Curtis and Charles after all. Still, immediately after, she must admit the good sense of his first question: "Besides the three of us, and this poor corpse, who else is within these walls?"

"There are but two maid-servants, sir. The stableman and his wife live in the barn cottage."

"Then we will soon catch our villain," he announced confidently, "for you will see that the body, though it lay before the fire, is cooling. And yet although it is cooling, it is still not cold. So she has not been long dead—not since before the snow started—am I right?"

"You are indeed," Elizabeth answered. "My poor mistress sat eating as the snow fell." She was sure there was no way to bring the murder home to her, but what did concern her was Richard's influence over her foolish Charles—it would be too bad indeed if she must get rid of Richard too before she could at last reach Charles!

"And we remarked, did we not, that ours were the first boot-marks on that trackless snow?" Richard appealed to Charles who said, "Boots? Tracks? Snow? Oh, indeed!" as the light broke, "To be sure, there were no signs outside. Nobody had left the house. You pointed it out," he went on admiringly. "That is what you said. Nobody has left since the snow fell, you said."

"And of course nobody came in, either, before ourselves," Richard said impatiently. "You see that, don't you?"

"Oh, of course," Charles said. "I see it very clearly, now that you point it out. Nobody went out, and nobody came in, and the snow was unmarked, and that is how we may be sure."

Richard looked thoughtfully at Elizabeth, and in spite of her confidence her heart beat faster. But his next words showed he meant only to question her about the others. "What manner of women are they?"

"Two decent spinsters, sir. Anne, young, and Jane not likely to see forty again." She did hope that neither would be branded a murderess, although if so it must be, she did incline to Jane. She would not wish trouble on Anne.

"Have them down," Richard commanded, and Charles said, "Indeed,

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that is best. It is what I would have said myself, if I had thought of it. Have the women down and let us learn which of them did this cruel thing. I will have her before the Magistrate, never fear. I did not expect my poor aunt to be dead, you know. I did not think of murder, or anything like it."

Elizabeth was then enjoined by Richard not to tell the reason for her errand, as surprise must work on the side of justice, and this instruction was seconded by Charles, who said resentfully, "Yes, do not tell them. Let them find out for themselves as I must do. My own aunt, you know, and murdered, and I did not in the least expect it. Do not tell them, Elizabeth; they are not to be told."

Elizabeth said, "Yes, sir," quite properly, although already she was finding him a little fatiguing. Still, she had never expected his brain to light any candles, as the saying went. He would be all the easier to manage because of what he was —or rather, because of what he was not and could never be.

Anne and Jane must be roused from sleep and told to dress at once in what was quickest and yet decent, and to make haste to the sitting-room. Here they shrieked, and tried to faint, and upon being admonished not to be silly girls, gripped one another tight and stood speechless and staring.

"Come, now, you've nothing to be afraid of if you've done nothing wrong," Richard said persuasively.

"Oh, sir!" Jane quavered, and "Bless me!" Anne choked, and then both at once, "We've done no wrong, sir. Indeed, sir!"

"Then you won't mind telling us when you last saw your mistress alive."

Elizabeth could not but admire this method of proceeding, although she had foreseen nothing like it, expecting to have to deal with no mind any deadlier than Charles'. Still it was fascinating to watch the way Richard ticked off the times so that he cleared away everything up to the point where Anne was declaring, "The last time, sir, I swear it; and Elizabeth will bear witness."

He had led to the point too carefully, and she had been listening to the whole of it so entranced, that she did not see the danger until she was nearly mired in it.

However, "It was exactly so," she said promptly, so that no hesitation would appear. "It must have been as Anne says. From the time I returned from the village, none other saw her save myself. It was I who carried her supper to her, as always, and I who cleared afterwards."

"Was it all as usual?" Richard persisted. "I charge all three of you to test your memories. Was tonight the same as always?"

"No!" Anne and Jane spoke as one. They reminded Elizabeth she had been granted time to rest.

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"True," Elizabeth agreed. "And I took my rest, sewing by the kitchen candle."

"But after that it was all exactly as usual," Anne said loyally. "Elizabeth went up with the wine and water—which she would surely not have done if our poor mistress were not alive to drink it."

Like a heavy hand clapped over her heart there came the shock of remembering. Since setting the goblet on the hall table, she had never thought of it again. But even as she recalled it, Elizabeth forced herself to speak and make her words sound right. "You will observe another difference," she said. "Mrs. Parsons is fully dressed—she would have it so, she wished to receive Mr. Charles at whatever time he arrived, and so she dozed by the fire, fully dressed."

"Then you were the last to see her alive," Richard said.

"Save the murderer, to be sure," Elizabeth said quickly, for one part of her mind seemed able to grasp all that was said, in spite of her fearful worry over the unused wine that could reveal she lied, that here was one thing not as usual, and how was she to explain it, since both women had seen her carry the goblet up?

"Oh, to be sure," Richard echoed her last words. Was it mockery, that echo? She looked at him from under demure lashes, but he did not seem to see the weight of what he had pointed out, and she breathed a little easier. But less easy did she feel when he turned to something new.

"The house must be searched," he said. "Something may be amiss that will point a finger. You three, from knowing the house and its habits, must do the seeking. Take all the candles you need. Look carefully about you and tell me when you see anything, anything at all, that wants explanation."

Elizabeth, glancing about her as the others did, but moving closer to the door with each step, was halted by Richard saying, "This room first, as being the scene of the murder."

She had no choice then but to do as the others did, and conclude with them that except for the body and the blood, there was nothing wrong.

"Then we will start with the halls," Richard said, and Charles, who had been mute for so long Elizabeth had quite forgotten him, echoed, "Yes, the halls! This is the very idea I would have had next!"

At his words Elizabeth moved swiftly through the door—to be a moment beforehand was all she hoped for. Without wasting time to look back she lifted the goblet from the hall table and drained it. Then, setting it down carefully on the table, she turned triumphantly, ready for anything—except Anne, kind, well-meaning Anne, staring at her from the doorway.

"The wine and water, Elizabeth—

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you have just drunk Mrs. Parsons' wine and water!"

Elizabeth knew she was undone.

"Elizabeth brought the drink to her last night," Anne went on unbelievingly, "and the mistress would not drink?"

"The mistress was set on her night drink of wine," Jane asserted. "I'd sooner believe she could not drink it, than that she would not."

"Exactly so," Richard said. "She did not drink it because she could not—because she was dead—because, Elizabeth, you murdered her."

Elizabeth did not speak, for what more was there to say? She sank into the nearest chair and let her head droop.

"I knew it must be you," Richard said. *"I knew even before I knew.* There was something wrong from the beginning." He turned to his friend. "It was not in the character of your poor aunt, Charles."

"Was it not?" Charles asked blandly.

"Elizabeth's gown," Richard explained. "I knew your aunt would not permit a bonds-woman to dress so fine—it was not in her noble heritage to countenance it. You will recall, Charles, how greatly I wondered that Elizabeth should be willing to lead us to your aunt. And I was right to wonder, was I not, Elizabeth? You came into her presence gowned thus only because you knew her to be dead—because you murdered her, Elizabeth."

"But why?" Charles demanded. "My poor aunt had her taught to read, you know. And Elizabeth was fed at the grand table like any lady. So why should she kill her mistress?"

"To do you a good turn, man," Richard jested, little knowing he spoke the truth. "Possibly to help you into your inheritance and to remove a warder both. Without your aunt to oversee and interfere, you might have done Elizabeth a good turn in exchange by marrying her. She was after you, my friend."

"Oh, do you think so?" Charles asked, sounding pleased. "Do you really believe it? Because you know," he went on, "she would have got me. She's a pretty little woman, and she would have got me sure."

Elizabeth saw his regretful look at her. Yes, she would have got him—and that must be her consolation, alas! That—and one other thing. Her gown! The gown would console her to the end. She sat sadly, resignedly, but careful not to move lest her ugly boots show from beneath the hem of her skirt. Even now that she sat in the shadow of the gallows she could feel the great grandeur of wearing so fine a gown. She could not learn to hate it even now when she knew it was the silken gown itself, that would in the end form for her a deadly noose of hemp.

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An "unknown" short-short—and a surprising one!—by the celebrated novelist who was Kathleen Norris's husband and the brother of another famous novelist, Frank Norris . . .

THE GAMBLER'S WIFE

by CHARLES G. NORRIS

ONE OF THE MOST FASCINATING places in the United States, I consider, is Palm Beach, and the most interesting spot in it is "Whitney's." The name isn't Whitney's at all, but anyone who has ever been to Palm Beach will know the establishment to which I refer.

Whitney's is a restaurant and a gambling resort, and sooner or later everybody who comes to Palm Beach visits Whitney's.

There is no restaurant or hotel in France, Italy, Germany, or Spain that can compare with Whitney's in the matter of food. At Whitney's there are no menus; you order what you fancy from duck soup to hummingbirds' tongues *en brochette*—and the amazing fact is that you get what you order. But on your first visit to Whitney's you do scant justice to what is set before you, for very shortly, as the room commences to fill, your eyes begin to bulge. At every table you presently recognize someone who is either famous or notorious.

After luncheon this brilliantly dressed assemblage drifts down to the gambling room. By two o'clock this room is well filled, by three it is crowded, and it remains so until the early hours of the morning. It is far more interesting and better conducted than Monte Carlo. I was deeply impressed, and presently I welcomed an opportunity to meet Mr. Whitney himself.

We found him in a small, businesslike office hardly large enough for the big roll-top desk and the chair or two. Perhaps there was a safe; I can't remember. The office was behind a grilling of iron bars, and there was a uniformed attendant at the door who admitted us after Mr. Whitney had given the word he would see us.

I found him a man with a singularly unexpressixe face, firm set, square of jaw, cold of eye—much as I had expected. He runs his gambling resort as a business—and it is a matter of pride with him that it is conducted in an efficient, businesslike way. It is said that his profits are three million dollars a

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season, and I doubt this just as one doubts the reputed salaries of motion picture stars.

However, the man had marked personality. He interested me; I liked him. I wanted to talk to him, but it was difficult. He was not communicative. Presently I asked him how much he lost a season in the way of bad checks and bad debts. He hazarded $200,000, which he didn't seem to regard as heavy. As he spoke of this a light came into his eyes, and his lips gave the faint hint of a smile.

"I had a rather amusing experience the other day," he said. "I was sitting in my office one morning when word was brought in that a lady wanted to see me; 'Mrs. John Rossiter,' the man told me. I knew who John Rossiter was, so I told him to show her in.

"Before she said a word she began to cry. It wasn't the sobby kind of crying; the tears came into her eyes and began to run down her cheeks, and she kept trying to mop them away with her handkerchief, struggling all the time to control herself. I don't like that sort of thing, you know, and I usually sidestep it, but this kind of got me. I felt sorry for her before she opened her mouth.

"Her husband had been playing the tables, she told me, and on Wednesday—the day before—had dropped fifty thousand dollars. I've been acquainted with John Rossiter off and on for five or six years. Every year he has been coming down here, and I've known him well enough to say 'Hello,' but not much more intimately than that. At any rate, I've always had a good feeling about Rossiter. He was a clean-cut man, a good sport, and was pretty well liked, belonged to the Everglades and used to go about and be entertained quite a bit. I had seen him year after year here, but I hadn't an idea of how he played or what he won or lost. He had an account with me and always settled up very promptly at the end of the month, if there was any settling to be done.

"Mrs. Rossiter explained that the great sorrow of her life had been her husband's gambling. She had begged him to keep away from the stock market and from cards, and he'd promise her he'd quit, but then he'd slip and get caught again. The fifty thousand he had lost on Wednesday about cleaned him and his wife out. It meant—oh, I've forgotten what she told me exactly: selling the home—it was mortgaged already, she said—raising money on life insurance policies, taking the two girls out of school, herself perhaps having to find a position. It was a long story; I don't remember the details—but I confess I felt mighty sorry for her. Taking those two girls out of school was what I believe got me—I don't know why exactly. Well, at any rate, I told her that I didn't like the idea of anybody coming here and getting

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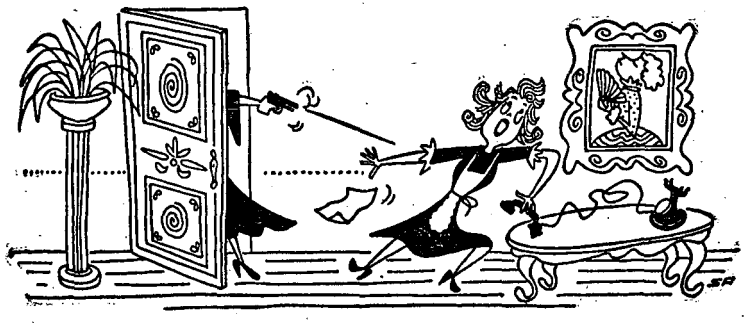
hurt that bad. Sentiment, if you like, but it's good business at the same time. It doesn't do for an establishment like this to get a reputation that people lose too much here. The upshot of it all was that I agreed to give her back the money her husband had lost, but on one condition, and I made that point very clear: John Rossiter was never to enter my place again. I don't like that kind of a 'piker' round here. If he hasn't got the money, he oughtn't to play. She promised me with the tears running down her cheeks, and I gave her the money, and she made me feel like a damn' fool by kissing both my hands, and asking God to bless me —all that bunk that a grateful woman feels she has to get off her chest when you do her a favor.

"I didn't think anything more about the affair until the very next afternoon when it was sharply brought back to my mind. My floor manager came to me and told me that John Rossiter had just come in, had sauntered into the roulette room, and was playing at one of the tables. As a rule, I never mix with what happens outside, but this made me pretty mad, and so I walked out there myself.

"I went straight up to him and said, 'May I speak to you a minute?' And when we were off in a corner away from the crowd, I asked him what the hell he meant by coming back to my place.

"'I want to know what this means,' I demanded. 'Your wife came to see me yesterday morning and told me about your troubles and about your dropping fifty thousand here on Wednesday, and I gave her back the money you'd lost on one condition and that was that you were never to enter my doors again. Now, what do you mean by coming here?'

"Rossiter stared at me. 'Why, Mr. Whitney, there must be some mistake. *I'm not married.*'"



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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**CARTER DICKSON** (John Dickson Carr)
TITLE:	***The Footprint in the Sky***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Colonel March
LOCALE:	England
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*One of the very best Department of Queer Complaints tales—and the favorite Carter Dickson-John Dickson Carr short story of Lee Wright, editor of Random House Mysteries.*

SHE AWOKE OUT OF CONFUSED dreams; awoke with a start, and lay staring at the white ceiling of her bedroom for a minute or two before she could convince herself it was anything but a dream.

But it was a dream.

The cold, brittle sunlight poured in at the open window. The cold, brittle air, blowing the curtains, stirred a light coating of snow on the window sill. It stirred briskly in that little, bare room; it should have set the blood racing, and Dorothy Brant breathed it deeply.

Everything was all right. She was at the country cottage, where she and Dad and Harry had come down for the skating on the frozen lake; possibly even a little mild skiing, if the snow came on according to the weather forecast. And the snow had fallen. She should have been glad of that, though for some reason the sight of it on the window sill struck her with a kind of terror.

Shivering in the warm bed, the clothes pulled up about her chin, she looked at the little clock on her bedside. Twenty minutes past nine. She had overslept; Dad and Harry

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would be wanting their breakfast. Again she told herself that everything was all right: though now, fully awake, she knew it was not. The unpleasantness of yesterday returned. Mrs. Topham next door—that old shrew and thief as well . . .

It was the only thing which could have marred this week end. They had looked forward to the skating: the crisp blades thudding and ringing on the ice, the flight, the long scratching drag as you turned, the elm trees black against a clear cold sky. But there was Mrs. Topham with her stolen watch and her malicious good manners, huddled up in the cottage next door and spoiling everything.

Put it out of your mind! No good brooding over it: put it out of your mind!

Dorothy Brant braced herself and got out of bed, reaching for her dressing gown and slippers. But it was not her dressing gown she found draped across the chair; it was her heavy fur coat. And there were a pair of soft-leather slippers. They were a pair of soft-leather moccasins, ornamented with beadwork, which Harry had brought back from the States; but now the undersides were cold, damp, and stiff, almost frozen. That was when a subconscious fear struck at her, took possession, and would not leave.

Closing the window, she padded out to the bathroom. The small cottage, with its crisp white curtains and smell of old wood, was so quiet that she could hear voices talking downstairs. It was a mumble in which no words were distinguishable: Harry's quick tenor, her father's slower and heavier voice, and another she could not identify, but which was slowest and heaviest of all.

What was wrong? She hurried through her bath and through her dressing. Not only were they up but they must be getting their own breakfast, for she could smell coffee boiling. And she was very slow; in spite of nine hours' sleep she felt as edgy and washed-out as though she had been up all night.

Giving a last jerk of the comb through her brown bobbed hair, putting on no powder or lipstick, she ran downstairs. At the door of the living room she stopped abruptly. Inside were her father, her cousin Harry, and the local Superintendent of Police.

"Good morning, miss," said the Superintendent.

She never forgot the look of that little room or the look on the faces of those in it. Sunlight poured into it, touching the bright-colored rough-woven rugs, the rough stone fireplace. Through side windows she could see out across the snow-covered lawn to where—twenty yards away and separated from them only by a tall laurel hedge, with a gateway—was Mrs. Topham's white weather-boarded cottage.

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But what struck her with a shock of alarm as she came into the room was the sense of a conversation suddenly cut off; the look she surprised on their faces when they glanced round, quick and sallow, as a camera might have surprised it.

"Good morning, miss," repeated Superintendent Mason saluting.

Harry Ventnor intervened, in a kind of agony. His naturally high color was higher still; even his large feet and bulky shoulders, his small sinewy hands, looked agitated.

"Don't say anything, Dolly!" he urged. "Don't say anything! They can't make you say anything. Wait until—"

"I certainly think—" began her father slowly. He looked down his nose, and then along the side of his pipe, everywhere except at Dorothy. "I certainly think," he went on, clearing his throat, "that it would be as well not to speak hastily until—"

"*If* you please, sir," said Superintendent Mason, clearing his own throat. "Now, miss, I'm afraid I must ask you some questions. But it is my duty to tell you that you need not answer my questions until you have seen your solicitor."

"Solicitor? But I don't want a solicitor. What on earth should I want with a solicitor?"

Superintendent Mason looked meaningly at her father and Harry Ventnor, as though bidding them to mark that.

"It's about Mrs. Topham, miss."

"Oh!"

"Why do you say 'Oh'?"

"Go on, please. What is it?"

"I understand, miss, that you and Mrs. Topham had 'words' yesterday? A bit of a dust-up, like?"

"Yes, you could certainly call it that."

"May I ask what about?"

"I'm sorry," said Dorothy; "I can't tell you that. It would only give the old cat an opportunity to say I had been slandering her. So that's it! What has she been telling you?"

"Why, miss," said Superintendent Mason, taking out a pencil and scratching the side of his jaw with it, "I'm afraid she's not exactly in a condition to tell us anything. She's in a nursing-home at Guildford, rather badly smashed up round the head. Just between ourselves, it's touch and go whether she'll recover."

First Dorothy could not feel her heart beating at all, and then it seemed to pound with enormous rhythm. The Superintendent was looking at her steadily. She forced herself to say:

"You mean she's had an accident?"

"Not exactly, miss. The doctor says she was hit three or four times with that big glass paperweight you may have seen on the table at her cottage. Eh?"

"You don't mean—you don't mean somebody *did* it? Deliber-

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ately? But who did it?"

"Well, miss," said Superintendent Mason, looking at her still harder until he became a huge Puritan face with a small mole beside his nose. "I'm bound to tell you that by everything we can see so far, it looks as though you did it."

This wasn't happening. It couldn't be. Afterward she remembered, in a detached kind of way, studying all of them: the little lines round Harry's eyes in the sunlight, the hastily brushed light hair, the loose leather wind-jacket whose zip fastener was half undone. She remembered thinking that despite his athletic prowess he looked ineffectual and a little foolish. But then her own father was not of much use now.

She heard her own voice. "But that's absurd!"

"I hope so, miss. I honestly hope so. Now tell me: were you out of this house last night?"

"When?"

"At any time."

"Yes. No. I don't know. Yes, I think I was."

"For God's sake, Dolly," said her father, "don't say anything more until we've got a lawyer here. I've telephoned to town; I didn't want to alarm you; I didn't even wake you—there's some explanation for this. There must be!"

It was not her own emotion; it was the wretchedness of his face which held her. Bulky, semi-bald, worried about business, worried about everything else in this world—that was John Brant. His crippled left arm and black glove were pressed against his side. He stood in the bright pool of sunlight, a face of misery.

"I've—seen her," he explained. "It wasn't pretty. Not that I haven't seen worse. In the war." He touched his arm. "But you're a little girl, Dolly; you're only a little girl. You couldn't have done that."

His plaintive tone asked for confirmation.

"Just one moment, sir," interposed Superintendent Mason. "Now, miss! You tell me you *were* outside the house last night?"

"Yes."

"In the snow?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Do you remember the time?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Tell me, miss: what size shoes do you wear?"

"Four."

"That's a rather small size, isn't it?" When she nodded dumbly, Superintendent Mason shut up his notebook. "Now, if you'll just come with me?"

The cottage had a side door. Without putting his fingers on the knob, Mason twisted the spindle round and opened it. The overhang of the eaves had kept clear the two steps leading down; but beyond a thin coating of snow lay like a plaster over the world between here and the shuttered cottage across the way.

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There were two strings of footprints in that snow. Dorothy knew whose they were. Hardened and sharp-printed, one set of prints moved out snakily from the steps, passed under the arch of the powdered laurel-hedge, and stopped at the steps to the side door of Mrs. Topham's house. Another set of the same tracks—a little blurred, spaced at longer intervals where the person had evidently been running desperately—came back from the cottage to these steps.

That mute sign of panic stirred Dorothy's memory. It wasn't a dream. She had done it. Subconsciously she had known it all the time. She could remember other things: the fur coat clasped round her pajamas, the sting of the snow to wet slippers, the blind rush in the dark.

"Yours, miss?" inquired Superintendent Mason.

"Yes. Oh, yes, they're mine."

"Easy, miss," muttered the Superintendent. "You're looking a bit white round the gills. Come in here and sit down; I won't hurt you." Then his own tone grew petulant. Or perhaps something in the heavy simplicity of the girl's manner penetrated his official bearing. "But why did you do it, miss? Lord, why did you do it? That's to say, breaking open that desk of hers to get a handful of trinkets not worth ten quid for the lot? And then not even taking the trouble to mess up your footprints afterward!" He coughed, checking himself abruptly.

John Brant's voice was acid. "Good, my friend. Very good. The first sign of intelligence so far. I presume you don't suggest my daughter is insane?"

"No, sir. But they were her mother's trinkets, I hear."

"Where did you hear that? You, I suppose, Harry?"

Harry Ventnor pulled up the zip fastener of his wind-jacket as though girding himself. He seemed to suggest that he was the good fellow whom everybody was persecuting; that he wanted to be friends with the world, if they would only let him. Yet such sincerity blazed in his small features that it was difficult to doubt his good intentions.

"Now look here, old boy. I *had* to tell them, didn't I? It's no good trying to hide things like that. I know that, just from reading those stories—"

"Stories!"

"All right: say what you like. They always find out, and then they make it worse than it really was." He let this sink in. "I tell you, you're going about it in the wrong way. Suppose Dolly did have a row with the Topham about that jewelry? Suppose she *did* go over there last night? Suppose those are her footprints? Does that prove she bashed the Topham? Not that a public service wasn't done; but why couldn't it have been a burglar just as well?"

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Superintendent Mason shook his head. "Because it couldn't, sir."

"But why? I'm asking you, why?"

"There's no harm in telling you that, sir, if you'll just listen. You probably remember that it began to snow last night at a little past eleven o'clock."

"No, I don't. We were all in bed by then."

"Well, you can take my word for it," Mason told him patiently. "I was up half the night at the police station; and it did. It stopped snowing about midnight. You'll have to take my word for that too, but we can easily prove it. You see, sir, Mrs. Topham was alive and in very good health at well after midnight. I know that too, because she rang up the police station and said she was awake and nervous and thought there were burglars in the neighborhood. Since the lady does that same thing," he explained with a certain grimness, "on the average of about three times a month, I don't stress *that*. What I am telling you is that her call came in at 12:10, at least ten minutes after the snow had stopped."

Harry hesitated, and the Superintendent went on with the same patient air: "Don't you see it, sir? Mrs. Topham wasn't attacked until after the snow stopped. Round her cottage now there's twenty yards of clean, clear, unmarked snow in every direction. The only marks in that snow, the only marks of any kind at all, are the footprints Miss Brant admits she made herself."

Then he rose at them in exasperation.

"'Tisn't as though anybody else could have made the tracks. Even if Miss Brant didn't admit it herself, I'm absolutely certain nobody else did. You, Mr. Ventnor, wear size ten shoes. Mr. Brant wears size nine. Walk in size four tracks? Ayagh! And yet somebody did get into that cottage with a key, bashed the old lady pretty murderously, robbed her desk, and got away again. If there are no other tracks or marks of any kind in the snow, who did it? Who must have done it?"

Dorothy could consider it, now, in almost a detached way. She remembered the paperweight with which Mrs. Topham had been struck. It lay on the table in Mrs. Topham's stuffy parlor, a heavy glass globe with a tiny landscape inside. When you shook the glass globe, a miniature snowstorm rose within—which seemed to make the attack all the more horrible.

She wondered if she had left any fingerprints on it. But over everything rose Renée Topham's face, Renée Topham, her mother's bosom friend.

"I hated her," said Dorothy; and, unexpectedly, she began to cry.

Dennis Jameson, of the law firm of Morris, Farnsworth & Jameson, Lincoln's Inn Fields, shut up his

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brief case with a snap. He was putting on his hat and coat when Billy Farnsworth looked into the office.

"Hullo!" said Farnsworth. "You off to Surrey over that Brant business?"

"Yes."

"H'm. Believe in miracles, do you?"

"No."

"That girl's guilty, my lad. You ought to know that."

"It's our business," said Jameson, "to do what we can for our clients."

Farnsworth looked at him shrewdly. "I see in your ruddy cheek. Quixotry is alive again. Young idealist storms to relief of good-looker in distress, swearing to—"

"I've met her twice," said Jameson. "I like her, yes. But, merely using a small amount of intelligence on this, I can't see that they've got such a thundering good case against her."

"Oh, my lad!"

"Well, look at it. What do they say the girl did? This Mrs. Topham was struck several times with a glass paperweight. There are no fingerprints on the paperweight, which shows signs of having been wiped. But, after having the forethought to wipe her fingerprints carefully off the paperweight, Dorothy Brent then walks back to her cottage and leaves behind two sets of footprints which could be seen by aerial observation a mile up. Is that reasonable?"

Farnsworth looked thoughtful. "Maybe they would say she isn't reasonable," he pointed out. "Never mind the psychology. What you've got to get round are the physical facts. Here is the mysterious widow Topham entirely alone in the house; the only servant comes in by day. Here are one person's footprints. Only that girl could have made the tracks; and, in fact, admits she did. It's a physical impossibility for anybody else to have entered or left the house. How do you propose to get round that?"

"I don't know," said Jameson rather hopelessly. "But I want to hear her side of it first. The only thing nobody seems to have heard, or even to be curious about, is what she thinks herself."

Yet, when he met her at the cottage late that afternoon, she cut the ground from under his feet.

Twilight was coming down when he turned in at the gate, a bluish twilight in which the snow looked gray. Jameson stopped a moment at the gate, and stared across at the thin laurel-hedge dividing this property from Mrs. Topham's. There was nothing remarkable about this hedge, which was some six feet high and cut through by a gateway like a Gothic arch. But in front of the arch, peering up at the snow-coated side of the hedge just above it, stood a large figure in cap and waterproof. Somehow he looked familiar. At his elbow another man evidently the local

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Superintendent of Police, was holding up a camera; and a flash-bulb glared against the sky. Though he was too far away to hear anything, Jameson had a queer impression that the large man was laughing uproariously.

Harry Ventnor, whom he knew slightly, met Jameson at the door.

"She's in there," Harry explained, nodding toward the front room. "Er—don't upset her, will you? Here, what the devil are they doing with that hedge?"

He stared across the lawn.

"Upset her?" said Jameson with some asperity. "I'm here, if possible, to help her. Won't you or Mr. Brant give some assistance? Do you honestly think that Miss Brant in her rational senses could have done what they say she did?"

"In her rational senses?" repeated Harry. After looking at Jameson in a curious way, he said no more; he turned abruptly and hurried off across the lawn.

Yet Dorothy, when Jameson met her, gave no impression of being out of her rational senses. It was her straightforwardness he had always liked, the straightforwardness which warmed him now. They sat in the homely, firelit room, by the fireplace over which were the silver cups to denote Harry's athletic and gymnastic prowess, and the trophies of John Brant's earlier days at St. Moritz. Dorothy herself was an outdoor girl.

"To advise me?" she said. "You mean, to advise me what to say when they arrest me?"

"Well, they haven't arrested you yet, Miss Brant."

She smiled at him. "And yet I'll bet that surprises you, doesn't it? Oh, I know how deeply I'm in! I suppose they're only poking about to get more evidence. And then there's a new man here, a man named March, from Scotland Yard. I feel almost flattered."

Jameson sat up. He knew now why that immense figure by the hedge had seemed familiar. "Not Colonel March?"

"Yes. Rather a nice person, really," answered Dorothy, shading her eyes with her hand. Under her light tone he felt that her nerves were raw. "Then again, they've been all through my room. And they can't find the watch and the brooch and the rings I'm supposed to have stolen from Aunt Renée Topham. Aunt Renée!"

"So I've heard. But that's the point—what are they getting at? A watch and a brooch and a couple of rings! Why should you steal that from anybody, let alone from her?"

"Because they weren't hers," said Dorothy, suddenly looking up with a white face, and speaking very fast. "They belonged to my mother."

"Steady."

"My mother is dead," said Dorothy. "I suppose it wasn't just the watch and the rings, really. That was the excuse, the breaking point, the thing that brought it on. My

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mother was a great friend of Mrs. Topham. It was 'Aunt Renée' this and 'Aunt Renée,' that, while my mother was alive to pamper her. But my mother wanted me to have those trinkets, such as they were. Dear Aunt Renée Topham coolly appropriated them, as she appropriates everything else she can. I never knew what had happened to them until yesterday.

"Do you know that kind of woman? Mrs. Topham is really charming, aristocratic and charming, with the cool charm that takes all it can get and expects to go on getting it. I know for a fact that she's really got a lot of money, though what she does with it I can't imagine: and the real reason why she buries herself in the country is that she's too mean to risk spending it in town. I never could endure her. Then, when my mother died and I didn't go on pampering Aunt Renée as she thought I should, it was a very different thing. How that woman loves to talk about us! Harry's debts and my father's shaky business. And *me*."

She checked herself again, smiling at him. "I'm sorry to inflict all this on you."

"You're not inflicting on me."

"But it's rather ridiculous, isn't it?"

"'Ridiculous,'" said Jameson grimly, "is not the word I should apply to it. So you had a row with her?"

"Oh, a glorious row. A beautiful row. The grandmother of all rows."

"When?"

"Yesterday. When I saw her wearing my mother's watch."

She looked at the fire, over which the silver cups glimmered.

"Maybe I said more than I should have," she went on. "But I got no support from my father or Harry. I don't blame Dad: he's so worried about business, and that bad arm of his troubles him so much sometimes that all he wants is peace and quiet. As for Harry, *he* doesn't really like her; but she took rather a fancy to him, and that flatters him. He's a kind of male counterpart of Aunt Renée. Out of a job? —well, depend on somebody else. And I'm in the middle of all this. It's 'Dolly, do this,' and 'Dolly, do that,' and 'Good old Dolly; she won't mind.' But I do mind. When I saw that woman standing there wearing my mother's watch, and saying commiserating things about the fact that we couldn't afford a servant, I felt that something ought to be done about it. So I suppose I must have done something about it."

Jameson reached out and took her hands. "All right," he said. "What did you do?"

"I don't know! That's just the trouble."

"But surely—"

"No. That was one of the things Mrs. Topham always had such sport with. You don't know much when you walk in your sleep.

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"Ridiculous, isn't it?" she went on, after another pause. "Utterly ludicrous. But not to me! Not a bit. Ever since I was a child, when I've been overtired or nervously exhausted, it's happened. Once I came downstairs and built and lit a fire in the dining room, and set the table for a meal. I admit it doesn't happen often, and never before with results like this." She tried to laugh. "But why do you think my father and Harry looked at me like that? That's the worst of it. I really don't know whether I'm a near-murderer or not."

This was bad.

Jameson admitted that to himself, even as his reason argued against it. He got up to prowl round the room, and her brown eyes never left him. He could not look away; he saw the tensity of her face in every corner.

"Look here," he said quietly, "this is nonsense."

"Oh, please. Don't you say that. It's not very original."

"But do you seriously think you went for that woman and still don't know anything about it now?"

"Would it be more difficult than building a fire?"

"I didn't ask you that. *Do* you think you did it?"

"No," said Dorothy.

That question did it. She trusted him now. There was understanding and sympathy between them, a mental force and communication that could be felt as palpably as the body gives out heat.

"Deep down inside me, no, I don't believe it. I think I should have waked up. And there was no—well, no blood on me, you know. But how are you going to get round the evidence?"

The evidence. Always the evidence.

"I did go across there. I can't deny that. I remember half waking up as I was coming back. I was standing in the middle of the lawn in the snow. I had on my fur coat over my pajamas; I remember feeling snow on my face and my wet slippers under me. I was shivering. And I remember running back. That's all. If I didn't do it, how could anybody else have done it?"

"I beg your pardon," interposed a new voice. Do you mind if, both figuratively and literally, I turn on the light?"

Dennis Jameson knew the owner of that voice. There was the noise of someone fumbling after an electric switch; then, in homely light, Colonel March beamed and basked. Colonel March's seventeen stone was swathed round in a waterproof as big as a tent. He wore a large tweed cap. Under this his speckled face glowed in the cold; and he was smoking, with gurgling relish, the large-bowled pipe which threatened to singe his sandy mustache.

"Ah, Jameson!" he said. He took the pipe out of his mouth and made a gesture with it. "So it *was* you. I thought I saw you come in. I don't

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want to intrude; but I think there are at least two things that Miss Brant ought to know."

Dorothy turned round quickly.

"First," pursued Colonel March, "that Mrs. Topham is out of danger. She is at least able, like an after-dinner speaker, to say a few words; though with about as much coherence. Second, that out on your lawn there is one of the queerest objects I ever saw in my life."

Jameson whistled. "You've met this fellow?" he said to Dorothy. "He is the head of the Department of Queer Complaints. When they come across something outlandish, which may be a hoax or a joke but, on the other hand, may be a serious crime, they shout for him. His mind is so obvious that he hits it every time. To my certain knowledge he has investigated a disappearing room, chased a walking corpse, and found an invisible piece of furniture. If he goes so far as to admit that a thing is a bit unusual, you can look out for squalls."

Colonel March nodded quite seriously. "Yes," he said. "That is why I am here, you see. They thought we might be interested in that footprint."

"That footprint?" cried Dorothy. "You mean—?"

"No, no; not your footprint, Miss Brant. Another one. Let me explain. I want you, both of you, to look out of the window; I want you to take a look at the laurel-hedge between this cottage and the other. The light is almost gone, but study it."

Jameson went to the window and peered out.

"Well?" he demanded. "What about it? It's a hedge."

"As you so shrewdly note, it is a hedge. Now let me ask you a question. Do you think a person could walk along the top of that hedge?"

"Good lord, no!"

"No? Why not?"

"I don't see the joke," said Jameson, "but I'll make the proper replies. Because the hedge is only an inch or two thick. It wouldn't support a cat. If you tried to stand on it, you'd come through like a ton of bricks."

"Quite true. Then what would you say if I told you that someone weighing at least twelve stone must have climbed up the side of it?"

Nobody answered him; the thing was so obviously unreasonable that nobody could answer.

Dorothy Brant and Dennis Jameson looked at each other.

"For," said Colonel March, "it would seem that somebody at least climbed up there. Look at the hedge again. You see the arch cut in for a gate? Just above that, in the snow along the side of the hedge, there are traces of a footprint. It is a large footprint. I think it can be identified by the heel, though most of it is blurred and sketchy."

Walking quickly and heavily, Dorothy's father came into the

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room. He started to speak, but seemed to change his mind at the sight of Colonel March. He went over to Dorothy, who took his arm.

"Then," insisted Jameson, "somebody did climb up on the hedge?"

"I doubt it," said Colonel March. "How could he?"

Jameson pulled himself together. "Look here, sir," he said quietly. "'How could he?' is correct. I never knew you to go on like this without good reason. I know it must have some bearing on the case. But I don't care if somebody climbed up on the hedge. I don't care if he danced the tango on it. The hedge leads nowhere. It doesn't lead to Mrs. Topham's; it only divides the two properties. The point is, how did somebody manage to get from here to that other cottage—across sixty feet of unbroken snow—without leaving a trace on it? I ask you that because I'm certain you don't think Miss Brant is guilty."

Colonel March looked apologetic. "I know she isn't," he answered.

In Dorothy Brant's mind was again that vision of the heavy paperweight inside which, as you shook it, a miniature snowstorm arose. She felt that her own wits were being shaken and clouded in the same way.

"I knew Dolly didn't do it," said John Brant, suddenly putting his arm round his daughter's shoulder. "I knew that. I told them so. But—"

Colonel Mach silenced him. "The real thief, Miss Brant, did not want your mother's watch and brooch and chain and rings. It may interest you to know what he did want. He wanted about fifteen hundred pounds in notes and gold sovereigns, tucked away in that same shabby desk. You seem to have wondered what Mrs. Topham did with her money. That is what she did with it. Mrs. Topham, by the first words she could get out in semi-consciousness, was merely a common or garden variety of miser. That dull-looking desk in her parlor was the last place any burglar would look for a hoard. Any burglar, that is, except one."

"Except one?" repeated John Brant, and his eyes seemed to turn inward.

A sudden ugly suspicion came to Jameson.

"Except one who knew, yes. You, Miss Brant, had the blame deliberately put on you. There was no malice in it. It was simply the easiest way to avoid pain and trouble to the gentleman who did it.

"Now hear what you really did, Miss Brant," said Colonel March, his face darkening. "You did go out into the snow last night. But you did not go over to Mrs. Topham's; and you did not make those two artistic sets of footprints in the snow. When you tell us in your own story that you felt snow sting on your face as well as underfoot,

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it requires no vast concentration, surely, to realize that the snow was still falling. You went out into it, like many sleepwalkers; you were shocked into semi-consciousness by the snow and the cold air; and you returned long before the end of the snowfall, which covered any real prints you may have made.

"The real thief—who was very much awake—heard you come back and tumble into bed. He saw a heaven-sent opportunity to blame you for a crime you might even think you had committed. He slipped in and took the slippers out of your room. And, when the snow had stopped, he went across to Mrs. Topham's. He did not mean to attack her. But she was awake and surprised him; and so, of course, Harry Ventnor struck her down."

"Harry—" The word, which Dorothy had said almost at a scream, was checked. She looked round quickly at her father; then she stared straight ahead; then she began to laugh.

"Of course," said Colonel March. "As usual, he was letting his—what is it?—his 'good old Dolly' take the blame."

A great cloud seemed to have left John Brant; but the fussed and worried look had not left him. He blinked at Colonel March.

"Sir," he said, "I would give my good arm to prove what you say. That boy has caused me half the trouble I ever had. But are you raving mad?"

"No."

"I tell you he couldn't have done it! He's Emily's son, my sister's son. He may be a bad lot; but he's not a magician."

"You are forgetting," said Colonel March, "a certain size-ten footprint. You are forgetting that interesting sight, a smeared and blurred size-ten footprint on the side of a hedge which would not have held up a cat. A remarkable footprint. A disembodied footprint."

"But that's the whole trouble," roared the other. "The two lines of tracks in the snow were made by a size four shoe! Harry couldn't have made them, any more than I could. It's a physical impossibility. Harry wears size ten. You don't say he could get his feet into flat leather moccasins which would fit my daughter?"

"No," said Colonel March. "But he could get his hands into them."

There was a silence. The Colonel wore a dreamy look, almost a pleased look.

"And in this unusual but highly practical pair of gloves," the Colonel went on, "Harry Ventnor simply walked across to the other cottage on his hands. No more than that. For a trained gymnast—as those silver cups will indicate—it was nothing. For a rattle-brained gentleman who needed money it was ideal. He crossed in a thin coating of snow, which would show no difference in weight. Doorsteps,

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cleared of snow by the overhanging roof, protected him at either end when he stood upright. He had endless opportunities to get a key to the side door. Unfortunately, there was that rather low archway in the hedge. Carrying himself on his hands, his feet were curved up and back over the arch of his body to balance him; he blundered, and smeared that disembodied footprint on the side of the hedge. To be quite frank, I am delighted with the device. It is crime upside down; it is leaving a footprint in the sky; it is—"

"A fair cop, sir," concluded Superintendent Mason, sticking his head in at the door. "They got him on the other side of Guildford. He must have smelled something wrong when he saw us taking photographs. But he had the stuff on him."

Dorothy Brant stood looking for a long time at the large, untidy blimp of a man who was still chuckling with pleasure.

Then she joined in.

"I trust," observed Dennis Jameson politely, "that everybody is having a good time. For myself, I've had a couple of unpleasant shocks today; and just for a moment I was afraid I should have another one. For a moment I honestly thought you were going to pitch on Mr. Brant."

"So did I," agreed Dorothy, and beamed at her father. "That's why it's so funny now."

John Brant looked startled—but not half so startled as Colonel March.

"Now there," the Colonel said, "I honestly do not understand you. I am the Department of Queer Complaints. If you have a ghost in your attic or a footprint on top of your hedge, ring me up. But a certain success has blessed us because, as Mr. Jameson says, I look for the obvious. And Lord love us! —if you have decided that a crime was committed by a gentleman who could walk on his hands, I will hold under torture that you are not likely to succeed by suspecting the one person in the house who has a crippled arm."

NEXT MONTH . . .

A new "mad caper" by a modern master

JOHN COLLIER's *The Love Connoisseur*

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **TALMAGE POWELL**

TITLE: ***Dear Mr. Lonelyheart***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALES: South Carolina and New York

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Trudy Bell was just a li'l old Southern girl in her young twenties and Mr. Amos Singleton was just a li'l old Northern man in his mid-sixties . . .*

2643 Elm Ave.
Centerville, S. C.
July 9

Dear Mr. Singleton,

I have read your description in the cute little news letter put out by the Orange Blossoms Friendship Society.

I, too, am a lonely person, Mr. Singleton. So please don't think me forward. I'm just ever so lonely, and that is why I'm writing to a man I've never seen before. I'd like to correspond with a mature gentleman, and I am sure it would be like a beautiful light in my dreary existence.

I'm a whole heap younger than you, being an ignorant 23 years of age. But I'm sure that years don't really determine age, aren't you? I don't find much in common with the boys of my age. They're so silly. And all the 65 year old men in my little town are married.

But oh how I long for real intelligent, mature talk with someone. So I'm not forward, Mr. Singleton. Really I'm not. I'm just real lonely down here in this little town in the sands of South Carolina.

I thought your face, in that little picture in the news letter, was the sweetest, kindest, most intelligent I have ever seen.

Dear me, now I know you will think I'm a forward girl, but really I'm not. My poor old mother says I carry my honesty beyond the point of virtue, and I suppose that's true. I just can't be dishonest. It

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hurts me inside. So I had to tell you honest how I felt about your picture, and feeling that way, I picked you of all the men in the news letter to write to.

I don't make a practice of this kind of thing. Really I don't. But we're both members of the same lonelyhearts club and that makes a difference, doesen't it? I mean, it isn't just like writing to a stranger, is it?

Your friend(?)
Trudy Bell

P.S. It must be awfully exciting, being the retired owner of a big fertilizer factory. I'm just dying to hear all about you, how you had all those hundreds of people working for you and gobs of salesmen out on the road selling your products.

2643 Elm Ave.
Centerville, S. C.
July 14

Dear Mr. Singleton,

I'm ever so grateful you answered my little old letter so fast. After I mailed my letter, I almost wished I hadn't done it. I couldn't help but think that I had written to a strange man. I didn't sleep a wink the whole night through. Honest I didn't. I was afraid you wouldn't understand my writing a strange man, and I was purely fearful you'd think my letter plumb silly.

I feel much better now, thanks to you. I have to be honest. So I'll say that yours was the sweetest, nicest letter I ever had from anybody. Not that the mailman breaks his back with letters to me, ha, ha Especially with letters from strangers. Yours was the first of that kind I ever had. But what I mean is, letters from my own darling mother were never so sweet and understanding as yours. I know you must be a great man, and I'm humbly thankful for your friendship. I was real pleased that you enjoyed my letter so much. I sure enjoyed yours. My, I know you're a strong spirited man to have borne up under all the responsibilities of your business life. Why, the way you started out as a young man with nothing and built up that fertilizer factory reads just like a story book.

I truly feel sorry that you lost your wife three years ago. I know what you mean by that statement that you feel like you've been living "in a vacuum". Loneliness is such a terrible thing. What a shame your wife never had any children Like you say, you've felt that there is just you on an island of loneliness in the midst of the whole world.

I feel like I know you real well We have a feeling in common, and I know it was a lucky day for me when I wrote you, if you get what I mean.

I am honestly flattered that you'd want a picture of little old me. I am not bad looking, if I do say so myself. Course I don't claim to be a raving beauty, but these silly boys

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with only one thought in their empty heads, seem to think I'm sexy. That's why I want the friendship of a mature gentleman. Not that I'm a prude, but a lady doesn't like to fight a wolf every time she has a date, and it's my one desire to be everything he wants when the right man comes along. I'd die before I'd be anything less.

Oh, how embarrassed I feel, pouring out my heart to you this way. But in you I feel I have found understanding, and I'm sure so fine a gentleman will take my condence as they're meant.

To get back to the picture. I don't have many pictures of myself. I think someone who has a lot of pictures made of theirselves is kind of self-centered, don't you? Maybe I'm wrong. Just one of my little old ideas.

I do have a picture taken of me at the beach last summer. It isn't in color, so I have to tell you that my hair is blonde and my eyes are blue. I had to take my dear mother to the beach for her health, and that boy lolly-dallying in the background is my cousin Ruel. He's a sweet young man, always looking after me. It was him that drove me and mother down to the beach. She felt ever so much better after her little vacation.

I really have to run now, for I'm a working girl. I work because I feel young people should have a sense of responsibility.

I'll be looking forward to hearing from you again, Mr. Singleton.

Warmly yours,

Trudy Bell

2643 Elm Ave.
Centerville, S. C.
July 19

Dear Amos,

It was so nice of you, Mr. Singleton, to ask me to call you by your first name. I think Amos is the sweetest, nicest name ever. It makes me think of wisdom and gentleness.

I have read your letter over and over. At first I didn't know how to take your remarks about the picture of me in my bathing suit. Then, I have to admit, I got a little thrill by the warmth of what you said, and I decided that I rather liked the compliments. You tease you, I'll bet there are many sides to your fascinating character. A great man, filled with sublime thoughts who nevertheless has a touch of the wolf in him. I do believe that you're one of those rare, truly exciting people that are not often found in this world.

And now, how about a big, clear, framed picture of you?

Your

Trudy

2643 Elm Ave.
Centerville, S. C.
July 25

Dear Amos,

No, I don't mind if you call me your Little Bunny. I think it's real

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cute and it took somebody like you to think up the term. To be honest, it makes me feel cuddly and wanted. Dear me, I'm blushing—but I can't help feeling the way I do, can I? And I don't care—I want you to know how I feel, because I suspect the way you feel, and my life was so drab before I wrote to you, but now it isn't.

I certainly appreciate the picture, and you didn't have to apologize because your hair is white and thin on top. I think your hair is just right. I looked at your picture a long time. And you know what I decided? Honest, I know that my first impression of you was correct. Those small eyes would peer deeply, but they are offset by the cute little pouches your flesh makes along the sides of your jaw. In short, I know you have real character. Nobody could take you in, no, sir! And that is the kind of friend I want with all my heart.

I'm going to place your picture right on my bureau. It will be the last thing I see each night. I'll tell you a little secret. I think your picture is so nice, so much like you, that each night after I get into my nightie I'm going to blow a little kiss to the picture and make believe you're beginning to care for me as I'm beginning to care for you.

Goodbye for now—darling.

Your,

Trudy

P.S. Dearest, please don't think poorly of me if I don't answer your next letter the very minute I get it I have to take dear mother t Florida for a few days rest. Sh needs it, but I haven't been able t afford it. We are not moneyed peo ple. I'm just a little old southern girl who has more than money, m virtue and good name. Cousi Ruel, bless his heart, is going t drive us down. He borrowed som money. Oh, I know the valu of a dollar and mother says I ca squeeze a nickle until the buffal stampedes, ha, ha. I hate to think of spending money in those hotels but it's all for dear mother.

2643 Elm Ave.
Centerville, S. C
August 15

My darling,

I write this with tears in m eyes. If there are stains on th paper, it's from the bitterest tear I have ever shed.

How could that person have said those things about me? When th old gentleman overheard my name he introduced himself and said a man in his home town was cor responding with a girl named Trudy Bell. What a small world he said.

Well, I tried to treat him rea nice. And he isn't such a friend o yours as he lets on. His dirty old eyes practically took my clothes of there in the hotel lobby, if you wan the truth. And he tried to date me up. So that's the kind of friend he is to you.

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And if he said me and a boy friend was lolly-gagging and burning up the town, he was wrong. This "boy friend" was Cousin Ruel. He stayed pretty close to me because I'm just a small town girl and he said I needed protecting and I'm glad I have somebody like that. And if that old man said his inquiries revealed that Cousin Ruel was a shady small time gambler and punk and not my cousin at all, I can just say that he was speaking a falsehood. And if he said further that I didn't have a mother in evidence, he just didn't see her, that's all. Dear mother stayed in her room most of the time and rested. And wasn't that the purpose of the trip? I think that nasty old man was taking a lot on himself. He wasn't doing all that snooping just for friendship for you either. He was mad plumb through and through because he practically drooled all over me and I wouldn't even give him a date. I'm not interested in people like that.

My heart breaks as I think of the evil he might have done us. In you, dear Amos, I truly believed a dream had come true. I guess if I never hear from you again, I'll at least have a short memory to treasure all my life. I just can't write any more. I can't believe that you'd listen to that old man. But I guess you've known him longer than you have me. And the only thing I'll ever feel for you, Amos, is what I have come to feel. I can say that at least I loved once in my life. Maybe it sounds strange. I've never seen you. But oh, I feel I know you. Even with this one weakness of listening to malicious gossip, I love you. I love you more than ever, because a little weakness makes you human. You seemed so perfect and strong and I was afraid I could never confess how I felt. But now that it's all over, I can say it and I'm glad I have.

Goodbye, dearest one, and tell that old man I forgive him. I guess when a devil possesses you, you just can't help yourself.

Once your

Trudy

2643 Elm Ave.
August 19
Centerville, S. C.

My own Sweetheart:

Again I write with tears in my eyes, but now they're tears of Joy. I have read your last letter until the sweet handwriting has just about been erased from the paper, ha, ha.

I had never expected to hear from you again, after what that old man said. I was going around like a half dead person, then your letter came, then the skies opened up, then I felt so good I wanted to run out and hug somebody.

I'm glad I followed my honest feelings in my last letter and forgave that old man and told you truthfully how I felt about you. I wasn't trying to do anything but be

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honest. And I'm sure glad I was. You say that a girl who could forgive the old man and expect never to hear from you again must be honest. Well, I was.

No, please don't feel like you have to give that poor old soul a piece of your mind. He didn't dishonor me. It was him that was dishonored. Let's just let him be and maybe one day he'll see what kind of person he is.

And don't you worry none about what you said. I can't forgive you, for there is nothing to forgive. I know I would feel bad if somebody told me a lot of black, dirty lies about you and I guess I would say a few things, too.

I'm going to tell you a teensy secret. You have stirred feelings in me I didn't know I had. I think about you all the time. The more so, when I thought I had lost you. If you hadn't written me again, I hate to think of it. I guess little old me would have just up and died. I'm going to move your darling picture—to my bedside table. So it'll be the first thing I see when I wake up every morning, just like it'll be the last thing I see before I fall into the land of dreams each night.

Take good care of my little old heart, darling.

Your slave,
Trudy

RECEIVED YOUR TELEGRAM STOP WILL COUNT THE MINUTES UNTIL YOUR TRAIN GETS HERE STOP A WALL OF FIRE COULDN'T KEEP ME FRON MEETING IT STOP DEAR MOTHER I STAYING AT SISTER'S IN GEORGIA S YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO MEET HE STOP BUT I'M A BIG GIRL NOW AND GUESS MY WAY OF ANSWERING THA CERTAIN QUESTION YOU HINTED A WILL BE ALL RIGHT WITH HER STO PLEASE HURRY STOP PLEASE. LOV TRUDY.

Pine Tree Lake, N.Y
September 2

Dear Cousin Ruel,

Why don't you come up and se us? Amos says it will be all righ We are living in a cottage, all alone Our nearest neighbor is six mile away. We have a big lake practi cally in our front door, and it cer tainly is quiet and private up here.

The lake is real big and deep Amos don't swim much, but he in sists on going in the boat ever time I go on the lake. Isn't tha wonderful devotion, to risk his lif possibly just to be with me? I there was to be an accident h couldn't save himself, much les me. Why, I'd need somebody's hel to reach the shore, and as for Amos why, he can hardly swim at all.

But we don't want to think abou things like that, do we, Cousi Ruel? You just come up here a soon as ever you can.

Amos is reading this over m shoulder and says any relative o mine is more than welcome an for you to feel more than welcome

Sincerely,
Trudy

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It isn't often that we publish two stories by the same author in a single issue of EQMM; but this month, to illustrate the tremendous range of creative imagination in the mystery field, we give you a second story by Talmage Powell. The difference between "Dear Mr. Lonelyheart" and "Salesmanship" is so great that the very difference itself will add an extra dimension to your reading pleasure . . .

SALESMANSHIP

by TALMAGE POWELL

HOWARD ALDEN'S DAY STARTED ON a miserable note. At breakfast he had to tell Clara, his wife, that they couldn't afford a new coat for her, much as he admitted she needed one.

It wouldn't have been so bad if she had burst out with something mean. Instead, she just sat there and looked at him as if he were a nonentity, an absolute zero.

Clara was a brunette, slender and beautiful. Howard was very much in love with her. It gave him a hard inner pain to have her look at him like that. He writhed inwardly when the villagers looked at him that way, but for Clara to give him such an appraisal was an unendurable torment.

She pecked at her oatmeal and sipped at the chickory she had brewed for breakfast.

Howard tried to think of something to say. She hadn't always looked at him like that. In fact, the way she had once admired him was the one thing in life he had to treasure.

He was a man in his mid-thirties, middle-weight in size, trim, sandy in coloring, and not bad-looking. He had met Clara ten months ago during a business trip to Atlanta and they had married after a brief courtship.

He had brought her back to Pine Needle, which nestled in the barren Georgia foothills, without the courage to tell her the whole truth about himself. She had come to the village knowing only that he was the one mortician in the county, as his father had been before him. His profession put him, in her mind, on a level with the mayor, the leading merchant, and the chief of police.

She'd had to learn the hard way that he was the most poverty-stricken man in town. The dirt farmers had their chickens and hounds, but Howard Alden had only a dreary undertaking parlor and ramshackle house, both heavily

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mortgaged, and a yellowed sheaf of bills his dead father had never been able to pay.

Clara had envisioned an old plantation-style home with servants, but she found herself cooking on an ancient gas stove and polishing silver plate that had worn to the base metal.

She had first wanted to redecorate the gloomy house. Howard had borrowed all the money he could, yet the best she could manage were some new draperies, a cheap living-room suite, and a table-model television set . . .

"Clara," he said, his taste for breakfast gone, "if you'll just be patient I know I'll collect some of the money due me."

"Collect from whom? The poor share croppers stuck in this God-forsaken county? The people you bury at two hundred dollars a funeral—on credit? And darn few burials at that. Most of the folks around here are too poor to die."

He didn't answer—he had no answer. Sometimes he felt he didn't know much of anything about life, or about women. He knew only the occasional dead who came his way. He wished he could change for Clara's sake, but he didn't know how.

Clara avoided his off-to-work kiss. He left the house with something squeezed tight inside of him. She had not mentioned it, but he knew she was brooding on going back to Atlanta. And thinking about her life here in this bleak Southern county, he couldn't really blame her.

His jalopy of a car rattled to a stop at the lower end of Main Street. There was little activity in town—a few dusty pickup trucks parked along Main, a couple of men swapping talk at the feed store, a few old-timers sitting on nail kegs under the unpainted wooden awning of the hardware store. They whittled irresolutely, argued dogs and women, and crusted the curbing stone with tobacco juice.

Howard sighed and went into his place of business. Once the gold leaf spelling out *Alden Mortuary* on the front window had no missing letters. Once the walnut benches in the chapel and the foot-pedal organ had been glossy and new. Once the front office had been something more than a gloomy clutter of shabby furnishings.

Today the place held only the old sweet sick smell of dying flowers—and death.

Howard opened the windows to air the office, then went out to the diner on the corner. The diner had been converted from an old street car an enterprising soul had brought in from Atlanta.

The usual crowd was in the diner. Bayliss, who owned the dry goods store. Sheriff Loudermilk. Bill Suggs, who trained horses and hunting dogs for the vanDeventer family.

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Suggs was an overbearing man, but it was said that old vanDeventer liked him. This was enough to give Suggs considerable prestige in Pine Needle. The vanDeventers owned practically the whole county—most of the farms, the cannery, even the local telephone exchange.

Maddy vanDeventer, beautiful, young, and blonde, had been educated at a fashionable girls' school in North Carolina and had traveled in Europe. If Pine Needle had a princess, it was Maddy. The old man prized her slightest whim above the welfare of the entire human race.

Howard ordered a cup of coffee from the hefty, sweaty girl behind the counter. He sat listening to Suggs, Loudermilk, and Bayliss plan a fishing trip. They had acknowledged Howard with the briefest of nods, not quite friendly enough for Howard to take the liberty of joining them. It was unspoken knowledge that he was too poor and too unimportant to be included in any fishing trip.

Howard sat down at the next table and tried to appear as if he weren't listening. They were going all the way over to Santee in South Carolina. There were bass there half as big as a man's leg. It was going to be a rather expensive trip, by the time food and liquor were included. It was the kind of trip men talked out—long and detailedly. They wouldn't leave for ten days yet, but a trip like this took a lot of planning and discussion.

And Howard just sat at his table and tried not to let the warm comradeship of the three other men make itself known to his senses. But he couldn't help the pictures that came irresistibly to his mind: the car piled high with equipment, screeching to a stop before his house in the early dawn. Bayliss yelling, "Get a move on, Howie! You waitin' for them bass to have grandchildren?" And Clara kissing him and telling him to be careful as he hurried from the house, loaded with rod, reel, creel, boots, and spare clothing. And Suggs slapping him on the back as he got in the car, thrusting a bottle into his hand, and saying, "Smoothest bourbon you ever drunk, boy. Right out of the old man's private stock. Take a shot of that to settle your breakfast."

Over at the next table Bayliss laughed heartily at something Loudermilk said, and the minute of fantasy was gone. Howard sat alone.

The pay phone on the wall at the end of the counter broke in on Bayliss's laugh like a sudden scream. The sloppy waitress shuffled back to the phone and unhooked it. "Yeah?"

Then she turned, holding the receiver. "For you, Sheriff."

Loudermilk uncoiled his hawkish six feet and strode to the phone.

Bayliss and Suggs continued talking. But they broke off when

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Loudermilk gasped, "Maddy vanDeventer! Where?"

The Sheriff listened a moment. Then he snapped, "I'll be right out!"

He turned from the phone, his face colorless. "Maddy vanDeventer's dead!"

Nobody else in the diner said anything for a long moment. Then Suggs croaked, "Where? How? By the devil, there ain't never been a sweeter, more considerate, nicer girl born than Maddy vanDeventer, even if she is rich. She just can't be..."

"She was found a few minutes ago," Sheriff Loudermilk said. "She slipped and fell off her cliff."

Howard knew that this simple explanation was sufficient to make the occurrence clear to every inhabitant of Pine Needle. Near Maddy's home, the vanDeventer mansion, there was a wild cliff with jagged rocks at its base. Maddy enjoyed taking long walks on top of the cliff in the cool of the evening. Apparently she had taken one walk too many.

Loudermilk, Suggs, and Bayliss rushed out. Howard sat staring at the bright hot day outside.

The waitress said something to him. She was so excited she was scratching the rolls of flesh along her ribs. He looked at her and said, "Huh?"

"I said I'm closin' up. I want to get out there."

"Yeah," Howard said. "I guess I better be getting back to business myself."

He had his undertaking parlor aired, swept, and dusted when Sheriff Loudermilk brought the girl's body in.

She was so young and beautiful. And then Howard, laying her out on the slab, touched the back of her head where the blood was clotted and the bone crushed, and she wasn't beautiful at all.

Simply pathetic.

She had been wearing jodhpurs, flat-heeled oxfords, and an open-throated nylon blouse when she had gone down the cliff. The ripped and torn clothing was no problem. The bruises and scratches also presented no great difficulties. The head, however, was going to be a really tough job.

Face drawn, Sheriff Loudermilk wiped his forehead with a blue bandanna. "She wasn't missed until this morning. Her daddy knew she was out and thought he heard her come in last night—but it was a servant walking around upstairs. She always sleeps until ten or eleven o'clock, so the poor old man thought she was safe in her own home until a couple boys came to tell him what they'd found at the bottom of the cliff. They were on a berry-picking trip."

"Where is Mr. vanDeventer now?" Howard asked.

"He's coming down here," Loudermilk said. He gave the body a brief glance. "I reckon it's a clear

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case of accidental death. She didn't have an enemy in the world."

The bell attached to the front door tinkled.

"I'll bet that's her daddy now," Loudermilk finished. The Sheriff trailed Howard as the undertaker went from the rear of the building to the entrance. The caller was vanDeventer.

The old man usually presented a rather dashing appearance, for all his years. He was slender and in good health. His white hair fell in snowy, glistening waves across his head. His blue eyes were sharp and clear, his lean, tanned face firm.

But now Howard was shocked at vanDeventer's appearance. He seemed to be a bag of dried sticks from a quaking aspen. His face was blotched with spots of color the hue of a sick liver.

"Please sit down, Mr. vanDeventer," Howard said, pulling a chair from the wall.

The old man sank into the chair and leaned his head on one elbow. Loudermilk hovered in the background as Howard came around and sat down beside the old man.

The girl's father pulled himself together. "I came to discuss . . ."

"I understand," Howard said.

The old man looked around the office, sat in thought, then said at last, "Perhaps a bigger establishment would be better. Perhaps an Atlanta mortician . . ."

Howard looked directly at vanDeventer and suddenly there was steel in Howard's eyes.

He spoke quietly but firmly. "Mr. vanDeventer, I am the only man alive to whom you can entrust this precious duty. I admit that Atlanta offers bigger establishments, but I offer you—and Maddy—much more. They would lay her away with the precision of a machine. I shall do so with the skill of an artist."

He rose and stood over the old man, his face kind but unyielding. "Two generations of Aldens have buried all the departed of this county, Mr. vanDeventer. The Aldens as well as the vanDeventers are of this land, this soil."

"You almost convince me, young man."

"I need only to point out the facts, sir. Consider me first as a craftsman. I grew up in this business, sir. I know all the old ways, the fine ways. I take no short cuts to streamline my effects. I am the most capable mortician in this whole state of Georgia.

"Next, consider me as a man. I knew Maddy—her generosity, her beauty, her graciousness. I can impart to her a full measure of her divine naturalness. I shall approach my task, sir, with the deepest sense of duty.

"Add to all this the deep knowledge I have of what you, sir, would want. When this land has become ancient, her memory will still remain a landmark. Is that not your true desire, Mr. vanDeventer?"

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"You read my heart, young man."

"I would suggest, sir, a crypt of the purest marble from our own Georgia earth. If I may be permitted, I would deem it an honor to go to the quarries myself and personally choose every stone, supervise every inch of its cutting."

"You would do that, young man?"

"Humbly," Howard said.

"Then spare no expense," the old man said, rising.

"As high as twenty thousand, sir?"

"As high as fifty thousand. The years left me are few, and of what use is my money now?"

The chauffeur was waiting outside to help the old man into one of the vanDeventer cars. Howard stood at the window and watched them drive away.

Behind Howard, Sheriff Loudermilk said, "We'll get the inquest over quick, so's you can get on with it, Howard. Just a formality, that's all. Ain't no doubt she died accidental, purely accidental."

Loudermilk went out. Howard spent the rest of the day seeing to preliminaries, such as pricing caskets in Atlanta and comparing them with prices quoted over the phone from Montgomery.

When he drove down Main Street at dusk he sensed a change that had come over Pine Needle. Sidewalk loungers waved to him, and he knew they were talking about him as he drove on.

When he got home, Clara met him with a kiss. Her smile was bright and warm.

She had cooked his favorite dinner, porterhouse steak with mushrooms. He hadn't eaten a dinner like that in a long while now. It did more than warm his stomach. It told him their credit at the butcher and at the grocery was once more A 1.

"Howard," she ventured, "do you think we might have a weekend in Atlanta sometime? After the vanDeventer funeral, I mean?"

"I don't see why not," he said expansively.

Right after dinner the phone rang. The caller was Bayliss, who owned the dry goods store and was Pine Needle's leading merchant.

"Say, Howie old man, think you'll be free for a few days after the vanDeventer funeral?"

"I might be."

"Sure hope so. Me and the boys got to have you on that fishing trip. Wouldn't be a real trip without you, son."

"I'd like to go," Howard said simply, really meaning it. He wasn't going to permit himself any resentment. Yesterday he had been nothing; today he was a leading citizen. The profit on fifty thousand in a pauperized village like Pine Needle made a lot of difference. That was all right with Howard. He was glad it did.

"Me and Loudermilk was talk-

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ing a few minutes ago," Bayliss said. "You know, this town needs enterprising young blood on our town council. We can chin about it on the trip. And I reckon I'll see you in the diner tomorrow?"

"Sure, a man's got to have a spot of coffee to keep him going."

"That's right," Bayliss laughed heartily. "Specially a real live wire. Loudermilk told me—and the whole town's talking—what a real spunky job of selling you did on the poor old man. Real salesmanship, boy!"

Salesmanship, Howard thought after he had hung up. He stood by the phone and a faint shudder passed over him. But he controlled it quickly.

Selling the old man hadn't been so tough. He hadn't figured for a moment it would be.

The really tough part of the job had been that moment last night when Maddy realized it was he who was shoving her over the cliff.

NEXT MONTH . . .

HUGH PENTECOST's	*The Man With Half a Face*
RUFUS KING's	*The Patron Saint of the Impossible*
W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM's	*A Point of Law*
JOHN COLLIER's	*The Love Connoisseur*
WILLIAM FAY's	*Some Days You Can't Make a Dollar*

and a "new" Thinking Machine story

JACQUES FUTRELLE's *The Thinking Machine Investigates*

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A ROUTINE NIGHT'S WORK

by GEORGE HARMON COXE

(*continued from page 14*)

When Grant freed Broderick's hands, and he in turn had untied Grant's, the detective stood up and stared morosely about him.

The columnist lit a cigarette. "Now what, Sherlock?"

Broderick ignored the crack and his roving humid gaze fed on a sullen anger that smoldered within him. He was not yet ready to admit defeat, but he would have a hard time explaining this episode and he knew it. With another unsolved case stacked on top of the Ruth Jackson job, the going would be tough for the whole department. And somehow the river, and the cold wet body, haunted him. He was familiar with murder, but not this kind; and something caught in his throat when he remembered the black oiliness of the water and the woman at the end of the pole.

Grant said, "A trance?"—which shattered Broderick's mood and brought him back to the business at hand. Stepping to the telephone, and without lifting the receiver, he began to experiment—to try and reproduce a certain clicking sequence of the dial.

He kept this up for two or three minutes, ignoring Grant's sardonic comments. Finally he said,

"I think I got the first four numbers. It figures P-A for the Parkway exchange, then 7, then either 9 or 0."

"Go on from there."

Broderick pointed to half a dozen scrawled numbers which had been penciled above the telephone stand on the fading pink wallpaper. "Two of these are Parkway numbers. One is 0 and one is 9. It's an even chance."

He dialed headquarters, asked for a connection, then repeated the two numbers. "See if you can check them for me, will you?" he said. "Yeah, I'll hang on."

While he waited he recalled the taxi that had been parked outside, and when he had information about the telephone numbers he gave the license number of the cab.

"It's a Red-and-White," he said. "Check with the dispatcher and have him get the driver on the company radio. If the guy keeps his trip sheet right, we'll know where he went from here ... Yeah, I'll call you back."

He hung up and glanced at Grant. "One of these numbers is a real estate office. The other's an apartment on Beach Street. I

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think," he said as he gave his hat brim a tug, "I'll have a go at that apartment house before I get the skipper out of bed."

On the way out Broderick stopped at the doorbell and pushed the button until he roused the landlady. Combating angry protests with curt threats of his own, he learned that the woman had kept the letter brought by Max as a protective measure, in case there was any complaint later. Broderick demanded this evidence and as soon as he and Grant were again in the police sedan, he turned on the dome light and read it.

The note offered little in the way of additional information. It said, in substance, what the irate landlady had already told him. It was neatly written in ink on a sheet of light-gray notepaper with a rough edge suggesting that it had been torn from a larger sheet.

Grant said, "It's a woman's writing."

"Looks like it."

"And she could have written it like I said—earlier today."

"Could have . . . Do you want to guess about this guy Max?"

"That's your job."

"He knew she was dead when he brought that note," Broderick said thoughtfully. "That part's easy to figure. Somebody framed it. They didn't want her identified or traced. With luck her body might've been carried out to sea; the odds were that it wouldn't've been recovered for a week or more. By that time, if it was found, nobody could say how long she had been dead; if we checked back to her room, the landlady'd say she moved and we couldn't prove different. Only the skipper thought I oughta check and—"

"You were lucky enough to have me along," Grant said.

"—the current smacked her against that boat club landing and her coat caught."

"So all we got to do," Grant said, "is find Max, and the guys that killed her, and why, and how —and then prove it." He yawned audibly. "Well, I'll give you credit in my column for trying."

"I'll appreciate that," said Broderick sourly.

The glass inset above the arched doorway of the ordinary-looking gray-brick apartment house on Beach Street read: *The Eldorado*. The tunnel-like vestibule was at sidewalk level and led to a sunken lobby boasting some potted shrubs, three tapestried chairs, a divan, and a desk which curved around mail cubbyholes and a switchboard.

Literally asleep at the switch, an attendant in an unbuttoned uniform drowsed behind the switchboard. He awoke with a start when Broderick slapped a hard palm down on the desk top, and when he saw the shield and heard the order, he unhooked a chartlike cardboard affair from the side of the switch-

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board and slid it across the desk.

Broderick led his eyes follow a lean forefinger down the typewritten lines thumb-tacked to the board. He heard Grant's choked exclamation, but he paid no attention until he had read every name on the schedule. Then he put the fingernail on a name halfway down the list and said,

"That's her Ex, isn't it? Lou Tandy." He slid the card back. "Anyway, the trip isn't wasted—I wanted to talk with him."

"I'd better announce you, Chief," the employee said hesitantly.

"You'd better not," Broderick said, and there was a level hardness to the tone that brought a corrected reply promptly.

"Yes, s-i-r. I'd better not."

"Don't go popping off with all you know," Broderick told Grant as he pressed the mother-of-pearl button set in the cream-colored doorway of apartment 3-F. "I haven't got any warrant, so to start with this is just a social call."

He turned slightly, cocked an eyebrow at the columnist, and unbuttoned his jacket, loosening the service revolver in its holster. He had to press the buzzer button again before the door opened to frame a plump, round-faced man in a blue-velvet housecoat.

Grant said, "Greetings, Lou."

"Hello, Wally—Broderick." Lou Tandy's chuckle sounded forced. "This looks bad."

Broderick moved forward so that Tandy had to back out of his way, and as he caught a full view of the expensively furnished room he saw that Brad Powell lounged in a club chair near the windows.

Tandy shut the door, sat down on an arm of the soft, and blinked pale-blue eyes. "What is this?" he asked fliply. "Business or—"

"Business," Boderick said. "We found your wife—ex-wife—in the river."

"Alma?" exclaimed Tandy. "In the river?" He started to laugh, thought better of it. "You're kidding—"

Broderick interrupted, told briefly the story of how and where the body had been found. As he talked, he studied Brad Powell, wondering about his presence.

A nephew by marriage of the city's Number Two alderman, Powell was well set-up, as tall as Broderick and heavier, but with a soft, pampered look about him. A loafer who liked bright lights and women, he had held various odd jobs at City Hall, but never for long. More recently he'd been working as Bell Captain at the Carlton House, not the best hotel in the city but one that did a heavy convention business.

"Dead, huh?" Tandy said when Broderick finished his story. "Good God, I never thought—" He broke off to run a puffy hand across a pink, moist face, then stroked his thinning sandy hair.

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"She's been down on her luck," he continued thoughtfully. "I've been sending her a monthly check, but I never thought she'd jump in the river and—"

"I didn't say she jumped in," Broderick said quietly. "I said that's where we found her."

Tandy stiffened and his pale eyes narrowed.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Is this supposed to be a gag?"

"Not to me," Broderick answered, "but there are some screwy angles to it." He told about Max and Rudd and the scene at Alma Morgan's room. "That letter doesn't click," he continued in the same even tone. "My hunch is that she was in the river before it was written. I could be wrong, but she hasn't got a brother, and even if she had and he was on the level, why the gun act and—"

"What's this got to do with me?"

"I traced the telephone call Max made," Broderick lied.

"Yeah? Well, it didn't come here. I ain't had a call all evening."

"You don't know anything about it?"

"Hell, no! Why should—"

"Then," said Broderick, moving away from the door, "you hadn't ought to mind if I take a look around."

Tandy stood up quickly. "I mind plenty," he said. "You can't come in here and push me around. If you've got a warrant, produce it. If not—"

The soft note of a buzzer interrupted him. Broderick was nearest the door. He took one quick step and pulled it open.

The girl said, "Oh—" uncertainly, hesitated, took a half step forward. "Isn't Mr. Tandy—" Then she saw him and her face brightened with relief.

She was rather pretty in a superficial way. Her dress was cheaply flashy, her voice a bit shrill. There was something pert and vital about her, though, and she seemed too young for the amount of make-up she carried.

"I—I just wanted to know if you got the baggage all right," she continued eagerly.

"Yes," Tandy said briskly. "Sure, it's okay. Now run along. I'm busy."

"That's fine," the girl hurried on innocently. "It would be awful to be stranded without your clothes and I wasn't sure—"

"Shut up!" said Tandy. "And beat it!"

Broderick had tensed when the girl mentioned baggage, and now a solution exploded in his brain in clear-cut detail. He played his hunch before the girl could turn away.

"Alma Morgan's baggage?"

"Yes—"

"I told you—" raged Tandy, striding to the door.

Broderick caught one arm, spun him around. He stepped to the door, then pulled the girl into the

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room without taking his eyes from Tandy.

"Did you write the letter?" he pressed.

"Why—"

"Did you?"

"Yes."

Tandy's hand flashed to his hip. Grant wheezed a warning, but it was unnecessary. Broderick's right hand whipped out the service revolver before Tandy could draw his gun.

"Leave it!"

Tandy's arm dropped to his side and the detective said, "Get it, Wally—and don't get in front of him." When Grant obeyed, Broderick turned to the thoroughly frightened girl.

"It's okay," he said gently. "Nothing to be scared about. I'm a police officer and there are a couple of things I'd like to get straight. Where was the Morgan woman going?""

"To St. Louis. She had to catch a train and—"

"I thought it was Chicago." Broderick glanced at Tandy, then back at the girl. "What's your name, Miss?"

"Joan Wheeler."

Powell came erect in his chair. "That's enough Joan. You don't have to answer his questions."

Broderick ignored Powell. "Where do you work?"

"The Carlton House," the girl said, unable to take her eyes from the detective's steady gaze. "I'm a waitress in the cocktail lounge."

"Powell asked you to write the letter and sign Alma Morgan's name," Broderick said as things began to add up.

"But they said—I mean—" The girl swallowed and tried again. "I thought I was doing her a favor."

"When did you write it?"

"About ten o'clock."

"Here?"

"Yes."

"When was Alma here last?" he said to Tandy.

"She hasn't been here in a week."

"A fingerprint man will check that too," Broderick said. "If she was here she probably touched something." He glanced at Powell as his mind went on and now he spoke his thoughts aloud.

"The Carlton's a convention hotel and you're the Bell Captain. Married men on the loose for a few days with expense accounts and lots of dough in their pockets. You touted them to the Club and the Jackson girl hung around there on the watch for pick-ups." He looked at Tandy. "You made sure she got the right sort of customer, huh, Lou?"

When there was no reply he said, "So when a guy got crocked enough, the Jackson dame would go with him to his hotel room and then the 'jealous husband' would muscle in. Max. The jealous husband; maybe with a gun—"

Wally Grant cleared his throat. "The old badger game? I thought

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that went out with silent movies."

"It's never been out," Broderick said harshly. "Because people don't change. It still works when you set it up right. You just don't hear about it . . . . So what happened to the Jackson girl, Lou?" he said. "Did she lose her nerve? How did Alma know about it?"

When he realized there would be no answer he turned again to Grant. "Watch 'em, Wally," and he started for a closed door he had noticed from the moment he stepped into the room. Wary of what might be beyond, he made all his movements with one eye on the panel. Now he threw it open quickly, his trigger finger tense.

He had been prepared to shoot, to take his chances. But he was not prepared for the problem that confronted him.

He said, "Drop it!"

Max said, "Drop it!"

It could have been a tie except for one thing. Max had a little help. His body was shielded by that of Thomas Rudd whom Max held with an arm around the man's neck in a stranglehold that tipped Rudd's head backward.

Max said, "Drop it, cop! I can't miss."

Broderick felt the tension slide swiftly up his spine. For another moment he stood quite still, his mind racing as he figured the odds and found them bad. He backed up a step, Max following, pushing Rudd ahead of him. Broderick thought about Grant and the Wheeler girl and knew he could not gamble with the gun.

"I'm not kidding," Max said. "I'm going to count—"

"Relax," Broderick said. "Let the girl out and I'll drop it."

Lou Tandy liked the idea. "Let her go."

"And have her run to the nearest phone and scream for the cops?" Max shook his head, but his gun was steady.

Powell jumped to his feet. His face was white and sick, and fear showed in his eyes. He wanted only one thing: to get away.

"I'll take her out. I'll keep her with me, Max."

The gunman thought it over; finally he agreed. "Okay. Take her to your place and stay with her until we get there."

Powell blew out his breath and reached for the girl. He spun her roughly toward the dor and now, with the fear behind him, his voice got nasty.

"If you'd just kept your stupid mouth shut—"

He grabbed her arm and she whimpered softly. He yanked her through the open door. When it closed, the room was quiet until Grant made a characteristic comment.

"This is the second time tonight Max has topped you, Brodie."

Broderick let his arm swing down. "I've been thinking the same thing," he said.

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"Let go of it," Max said.

Broderick dropped the revolver because he could not take a chance with Rudd between them. Max turned to Grant.

"You too."

"You heard him, Wally," Broderick said. "Let it go."

The gun thudded to the carpet and Tandy darted forward to snatch it up and then turn for Broderick's service revolver. In the momentary silence that followed Rudd spoke for the first time.

"I don't understand," he said incredulously. "I don't know why I'm here or where Alma is or—"

"Shut up!" Max tapped him sharply with the gun.

"Let him talk," Broderick said with a casualness he did not feel. "We're not going anywhere right away, are we? What do you do, Rudd?"

"I've got a dairy farm up in Vermont. I came down for a little holiday and I met Alma, so I stayed on. I've got a man handling the farm for me until I get back."

"Enriquo said maybe Alma was going to get married."

"That's what I hoped. When she wouldn't say yes right off, I asked her to come up to Vermont and stay at a hotel a few days and look my place over. She said she would but she had something she had to do first. She said she'd let me know tonight. That's why I—"

Broderick cut him off as he spoke to Tandy. "She knew about the Jackson girl, huh? It has to be that. You were afraid she'd tell Rudd. Did you give her dope first? Did you put her in the river alive?"

"Wait a minute!" Rudd's voice was suddenly ragged. "Put who in the river? What're you talking about?"

"Alma!" Broderick said. "The harbor police fished her out of the river about an hour ago."

"No," said Rudd, his voice tortured. "No!"

"Yes."

Broderick took a breath and now he gambled because he had nothing else left. He made his tone brutal and it was not entirely acting either—his own cold vindictiveness toward those who had put the woman in the river was genuine.

"Ten days ago another girl was picked up in a vacant lot—she had the side of her head bashed in. I think Alma knew something about it and tonight it was her turn. They put her in the river and if we hadn't identified her they might have pulled it off. If the harbor police hadn't been lucky she might never have been found at all."

Rudd's cheekbones showed white through the tan.

"But she said—"

"They murdered her," Broderick said savagely and eased a step toward Max. "She's in the morgue now. On a slab. On a cold—"

Rudd's stocky figure spun toward Max before Broderick finished. He must have known he did not have

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nuch chance with the gun in his ack. Perhaps he did not consider his; perhaps he did not care. Whatver the reason, he drove his shoulder into the gun just as Max fired.

There was a muffled report and he back of Rudd's jacket lifted to temporary peak below the the houlder. They hit the floor together and it shook with the impact is the gun was jarred loose from Max's grasp.

Broderick had followed Rudd by split second. When the gun slid o one side he scooped it up and whirled toward Tandy who had drawn back against the wall. And his time Broderick got an assist.

The columnist had dived for Tandy when the gun went off and now, with Grant practically on top of him, Tandy couldn't decide on a target. Broderick made a snap shot, feeling the welcome slap of the recoil and seeing Tandy's shoulder jerk sideways under the impact of the slug. As Tandy fell against the wall, Grant hit him and Broderick wheeled toward Max.

The gunman had fought clear of Rudd. He was on his knees now, and as Broderick faced him he whipped out a second gun, a tiny automatic that had come from some inside pocket or holster.

Broderick had time to aim and he did, his wrist stiff and the trigger finger steady. When the gun slammed, Max was slapped backward as if someone had struck him. He dropped the automatic, leaned crazily from his knees, and fell.

Broderick turned again to Tandy, who now sat with his back against the wall. Grant had collected both guns and was watching Tandy. It was then that the shot hammered from somewhere behind, and with that Tandy grabbed his chest and started to tip over.

For an instant Broderick stared, shocked and unbelieving. He saw Tandy sag to the floor before he realized what had happened. Then, as he spun about, he saw that Rudd had pushed up to a sitting position on the floor and was just lowering the automatic Max had dropped.

"That was for Alma," Rudd whispered and then the gun slid from his limp fingers.

Broderick stooped to pick up the automatic. He looked at it, and then at the one he had first taken from Max. He glanced over at Grant, who held Broderick's service revolver and the one Tandy had dropped.

"A lot of iron," Grant said dryly.

Broderick nodded and went to the telephone. He said what he had to say and came back to Rudd. For one who had recently been so hard in actions and manner there was a surprising gentleness in the detective's touch as he lifted the limp figure and carried it to the sofa. When he saw that the man's eyes were open he said,

"You'll be okay. It's high and I think it missed the lung."

"I don't care."

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"Sure you care. Only this time you were a little out of your class. The Morgan woman was not your kind—"

"I know what she was," Rudd breathed. "She was on the level with me. It would have worked out. She and I were going to—"

The voice trailed off, the eyes closed, and now Broderick swallowed and went over to Grant. Tandy was sitting up, his gaze cloudy and the stain from the two wounds spreading over his chest.

"I won't lie to you, Lou," Broderick said. "I don't know if you'll make it or not. You'd better talk while you've got the chance. Was I right about Ruth Jackson?"

"You had the racket right." Tandy coughed softly. "But it was an accident. She wanted to pull out and she'd been drinking too much. I guess she lost her nerve. We were sitting around my office late one night—she and Max and me. Alma came to see me because I owed her some back alimony. Jackson got ugly. She began screaming and Max clipped her. She fell like a log and the side of her head hit a door stop . . . crushed it. She was dead before we knew it. Had to take her out and leave her."

"Did Alma threaten you?"

"No, but—" He coughed twice and tried again. "It was Max's idea. With Alma here in town he was willing to let it ride because he knew he could always reach her. But if she married Rudd he was afraid she'd talk some day. H wouldn't take the chance . . . Sh was dead when she hit the river, he said in a voice that could hardl be heard. "I don't know what Ma put in her drink, but she was dead.

His head sagged as he finishe and he stayed where he was, chi on chest. Broderick stood up an exhaled noisily. He watched Gran rise. He glanced at Tandy an Rudd and Max.

"What a mess," he said wearily

"For a guy making a routin check on a suicide," Grant sai with unaccustomed respect, "yo did a hell of a job."

"I did nothing," Broderick said "Rudd gave us the break."

"The way I write it will be dif ferent," Grant said.

"You lay off!" Broderick poke the columnist's chest with a stif index finger. "You'll wait till th skipper gets here and you'll prin just what he says to print."

Grant blinked at the unexpecte fierceness in the detective's tone, a though he understood that, in this Broderick meant just what he said

"But—you should get a promo tion out of this."

"Hah!" Broderick's mouth twist ed. "Promotion, hell. I got an idea the skipper's going to be sore at me on account he missed all this be cause I didn't get him out of bed." He grunted softly and turned away "I'll be lucky if they don't measure me for a uniform and slap me back in harness again."

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